SOLDIER-DIPLOMAT: A REASSESMENT OF SIR HENRY WILSON'S INFLUENCE ON BRITISH STRATEGY IN THE LAST 18 MONTHS OF THE GREAT WAR

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ABSTRACT

Sir Henry Wilson remains one of the most controversial British Army generals of the Great War. A colourful character in life, he attracted admirers and detractors in equal measure; in death, his reputation was ruined by a biography based on his personal diaries. The Wilson of the historiography is, at best, a politician rather than a soldier, at worst an ambitious Francophile intriguer. This thesis looks beyond this accepted characterisation, reassessing his role in the formation of British and Allied strategy in the final months of the war. Wilson attained influence, and subsequently power, when Lloyd George consulted him after failing to persuade Britain's leading generals to change their strategic focus. The thesis re-examines Wilson's policy critique, which led to the creation of the Supreme War Council, and negated plans for a major Allied offensive on the Western Front in 1918. This thesis aims to shine new light on Wilson's work on the Council, with an analysis of its policy recommendations. The research will also explore the manpower crisis, the key issue for the entente in this period, and Wilson's contribution to the establishment of Allied unity of command. The diplomatic skills Wilson deployed to defuse serious strains between the entente powers will be examined, with particular reference to his time as Chief of the Imperial General Staff. His contribution to the debate on Britain's post-war imperial grand strategy will also be evaluated. The thesis will refute the long-established one-dimensional view of Wilson and suggest that he played a more influential role in British strategic development than has hitherto been acknowledged.

CONTENTS

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ABBREVIATIONS

AC	Army Council
ADC	Aide-de-Camp
AEF	American Expeditionary Force
AG	Adjutant General
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
BGGS	Brigadier-General General Staff
BLO	Bodleian Library Oxford
CB	Companion of the Order of the Bath
CAC	Churchill Archive Centre
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
CoS	Chief of Staff
DCIGS	Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff
DMO	Director of Military Operations
DMI	Director of Military Intelligence
EEF	Egyptian Expeditionary Force
EWB	Executive War Board
FM	Field Marshal
GHQ	General Headquarters
GOC	General Officer Commanding
GQG	*Grand Quartier General*
GS	General Staff
IWC	Imperial War Cabinet

JN	Joint Note
OH	Official History
LHCMA	Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives
MGO	Master General of Ordnance
MP	Member of Parliament
NLS	National Library of Scotland
PA	Parliamentary Archives
PMR	Permanent Military Representative
PPS	Parliamentary Private Secretary
QMG	Quartermaster General
SWC	Supreme War Council
TNA	The National Archives
WO	War Office

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis is a re-examination of Sir Henry Hughes Wilson's impact on British strategy in the First World War. It concentrates on the final 18 months of the conflict, from mid-1917 until the end of 1918 and considers his impact at this crucial point in Allied relations. The period was chosen because, for the first time, he combined influence with power. Until then, Wilson's wartime career had been, for him, an unsatisfying succession of advisory and liaison-related roles, punctuated by an undistinguished period as a corps commander. Wilson's fortunes changed during this period because senior politicians in Britain and France were searching not only for new ways to bring the war to a victorious conclusion, but also for senior military figures prepared to develop and implement such a strategic change. Wilson's ability to speak the politicians' language, and apparent willingness to do their bidding, improved his fortunes and ultimately led to his appointment as Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), the British government's principal military adviser, in February 1918. There was, however, no inevitability about Wilson's rise to prominence. Britain's Prime Minister David Lloyd George led a shaky and problematic coalition government. Sir Douglas Haig as Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) on the Western Front, and Sir William 'Wully' Robertson as CIGS, were a formidable partnership, popular with Unionist politicians, the public, and, for the most part, the Press.[1] At the same time, Wilson was no politicians' cipher, a mere catalyst through

[1] Haig was C-in-C from 19 December 1915 until the end of the war; Robertson was CIGS from 23 December 1915 to 18 February 1918.

which non-specialists got their way in steering Allied strategy. As this thesis argues, he had clear strategic views of his own, the result of important pre-war roles at the heart of the British Army's strategy-making system. This was dominated by his unshakable belief in the need to maintain the strongest possible links with Britain's principal ally, France. This conviction was developed in the years preceding the outbreak of war in 1914 and Wilson pursued it doggedly thereafter.

Wilson has suffered more opprobrium than most Great War British generals. In his case the brickbats were thrown not because he was viewed as a 'chateau general', one of the so-called 'donkeys' leading lions to destruction in a 'futile' war. Instead his detractors were, initially at least, colleagues and contemporaries. The focus of their criticism was not his talent, or otherwise, for leading men, planning offensives or tactical doctrine, but his character. The British official historian of the Great War, Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds expressed 'contempt and dislike' for Wilson.[2] Lloyd George, who bestowed on him both power and influence did so only, he wrote with the benefit of hindsight, because there was no obvious alternative. Wilson, said Lloyd George, was 'a shrewd politician'; a back-handed compliment from one of Britain's canniest parliamentary pugilists.[3] Wilson's reputation was undone not by his actions, which for the most part were not unusual in the higher echelons of the British Army at the start of the 20th century, but by his writings. Like

[2] Ian F.W. Beckett, (ed.), *The Memoirs of Sir James Edmonds* (Brighton: Tom Donovan Editions, 2013), p. xxiii.
[3] David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George* (2 vols.), (London: Odhams, 1938), (vol. II), pp. 1688, 1713.

many of his class and education Wilson kept a journal for much of his adult life. In it he scribbled thoughts and impressions of the day's events. Had he not been assassinated in 1922 it is likely he would have joined in the 'battle of the memoirs' and used both the diaries and his extensive correspondence, especially that from his time as CIGS, to write his own epitaph.[4] As it was his reputation was left to the tender mercies of his friend and biographer C.E. Callwell and his widow's naïveté.[5]

While the diaries are a goldmine for the historian, the publication of a selection from them in 1927 created an image of their author which has stood the test of time. The expressions of irritation, outrage, and abuse, aimed at foe - and often 'friend' - with which Wilson peppered his jottings ruined his reputation. Two years later, the Great War veteran Sir Andrew MacPhail demolished what remained of Wilson's character in what was effectively an extended review of Callwell's book.[6] For almost a century, the cacophony of late-night scribbled exclamations drowned out any opportunity for a more even-handed analysis. Sir Hubert Gough's biographer accurately described Wilson as 'an extraordinary man' who was 'imaginative, shrewd and articulate'. He also thought him 'lacking an original mind or depth of intellect'.[7] This latter claim, this thesis will argue, is incorrect. In life Wilson had many admirers, both political and military.

[4] Keith Jeffery, *Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson: A Political Soldier* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [2006]), p. 290; Ian F.W. Beckett, *The Great War* (Second Edition) (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2007), pp. 645-6.
[5] Callwell, C.E., *Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson: His Life and Diaries* (2 vols.) (London: Cassell, 1927).
[6] Sir Andrew MacPhail, *Three Persons* (London: John Murray, 1929), pp. 17-153.
[7] Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *Goughie: The Life of General Sir Hubert Gough CGB, GCMG, KCVO* (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1975), p. 5.

Lord Esher, an advisor on military matters to successive British Cabinets, thought him 'always loyal...If he is trusted he will run as straight as any thoroughbred...'[8] His charm and witty facetiousness made him good company. He also had many enemies who, no doubt correctly, mistrusted his love of 'intrigue', or in the modern idiom, 'office politics'. That said, Wilson was not alone in using connections, friendships and networks to further his career. He was, rather, 'the most politically adept member of the most politically aware generation of soldiers Britain had seen since the Commonwealth.'[9] Those wishing to thrive in any organisation have always had to form alliances, kowtow to authority occasionally, sometimes flatter to deceive. For almost a century Wilson was condemned not so much for what he did, as for what he wrote. His reputation had to wait until 2006 for Keith Jeffery's reassessment.[10] Focussing on Wilson the 'political soldier', it provided a much more even-handed analysis of his career. This thesis builds on this 'revisionist' view of Wilson, and aims to shed new light on his contribution to the strategic debate facing the Allies in the final 18 months of the Great War.

Wilson's detractors, both contemporaries and subsequent historians, made much of his love of 'intrigue', suggesting this was why he rose to become the government's principal military advisor. Wilson was a schemer, so the narrative goes, a lover of politicians, whose

[8] Esher to Derby, 29 December 1917, in Oliver, Viscount Esher (ed.), *Journals and Letters of Reginald Viscount Esher (vol. IV), 1916-1930* (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1938), p. 172.
[9] Brock Millman, 'Henry Wilson's Mischief: Field Marshall [sic] Sir Henry Wilson's Rise to Power 1917-18,' *Canadian Journal of History*, vol. XXX, (December 1995), p. 468.
[10] Jeffery, *Wilson*.

ungentlemanly conniving paved the path to greatness. In fact, until the alignment of several other stars in the civil-military firmament, Wilson's Machiavellian 'talents' had done little to advance his prospects. His pre-war career followed a similar path to other able contemporaries, culminating in Commandant of the British Army Staff College (1907-10) and then Director of Military Operations (DMO) at the War Office. While in the latter post, Britain's 'strategic reorientation' towards partnership with France hardened, in opposition to a resurgent Germany. Wilson was not sole creator of this position, but his, '...drive, enthusiasm and complete conviction about the necessity to render effective land support to France were to provide the stimulus to move military strategy on from the period of consideration and of deciding between alternatives to that of detailed planning for action.'[11] Wilson's 'masterful blueprint' for the BEF's mobilisation worked like clockwork.[12] He had good reason to hope that when war came he would be appointed to a senior position. In fact, the reputation he gained from his involvement in the toxic Curragh Incident of March 1914 hampered Wilson's advancement for at least three years. Britain's first wartime Prime Minister, H.H. Asquith, stymied his hopes of being Chief of Staff (CoS) to the BEF. 'Squiff' as Wilson contemptuously called him in his diaries and correspondence, believed him to be the true ringleader of this nadir in civil-military relations, dismissing Field Marshal Lord Roberts, another key participant, as 'in a dangerous condition of

[11] John Gooch, *The Plans of War: The General Staff and British Military Strategy c.1900 – 1914* (London: Routledge, 1974), p. 289.
[12] Ian Beckett, Timothy Bowman and Mark Connelly, *The British Army and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 208.

senile frenzy.'[13] According to Asquith, Wilson was at one time or another 'a poisonous mischief-maker', a 'clever ruffian', and 'that serpent'.[14] It was Wilson, therefore, and not the prime-movers Johnnie and Hubert Gough, who was blackballed for his role in the 'Incident'. The result was that Wilson spent the years 1914-1917 in a series of largely unrewarding roles. There was no inevitability about Wilson's rise to the post of CIGS.

The accession of Lloyd George to the office of Prime Minister, in December 1916, was fundamental to Wilson's advancement. Nonetheless, it took six months before he came to the Welshman's attention. Lloyd George had always opposed what he saw as the unimaginatively wasteful strategy of large-scale attritional offensives on the Western Front. Wilson's apparent willingness to view the strategy embodied in the Haig-Robertson axis from a different perspective, presented the Prime Minister with an opportunity to effect change. Wilson's chance came when, as the costly Third Ypres campaign was grinding to a close, Lloyd George asked his generals for their proposed strategy for 1918. Haig and Robertson could come up with nothing more imaginative than another large-scale offensive in Flanders. Frustrated, Lloyd George, who had already been in discussions with Wilson, asked him, and Haig's predecessor Field Marshal Lord French, to propose an alternative. This was the turning point in Wilson's fortunes and he grasped the opportunity. Unlike French, who criticised Haig and Robertson personally, Wilson concentrated on strategic

[13] Asquith to Venetia Stanley, 21 March 1914, in Michael and Eleanor Brock (eds.), *H.H. Asquith: Letters to Venetia Stanley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 58-9.
[14] Ibid., 6 November 1918, p. 311, 20 December 1914, p. 333, 28 December 1914, p. 342.

priorities, critiqued his colleagues' proposals, and recommended a defensive posture in the west to await the arrival of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF). Significantly for future Allied strategy however, he ruled out large scale campaigns in 'sideshow' theatres, something he knew was a favoured option of the Prime Minister. Wilson was no Lloyd George dupe; he was prepared to go against the strategic thinking of his fellow generals, but not to the point of refocussing Allied military priorities away from the Western Front to please his political master. As the most recent work on the British Army in the Great War has noted, in 1918 Wilson 'was no more biddable' than Robertson; their differences were ones of detail rather than core principles.[15] Wilson's most significant achievement, in a seminal strategy paper of October 1917, was to press for a body to take responsibility for what he hoped would be joined-up inter-Allied strategic planning, what became the Supreme War Council (SWC) at Versailles, outside Paris.[16] His paper was, in effect, a job application for high office. It was also a bold gamble.

Haig and Robertson were resilient individuals who, despite some important differences on strategy, presented a united front when dealing with politicians. They saw Wilson, rightly, as a stalking horse for Lloyd George's opposition to another major offensive on the Western Front in 1918. When Wilson became Britain's Permanent Military Representative (PMR) at the SWC it was not a foregone conclusion that he, or the new

[15] Beckett et. al., *British Army*, p. 348.
[16] TNA, CAB 27/8, WP 61, 'Present State of the War, future prospects and future action to be taken,' General Sir Henry Wilson to War Cabinet, 20 October 1917 (hereafter CAB 27/8, WP 61).

body he came to dominate, would survive, let alone be successful. The Allies had 'spent three years, against a background of strategic rivalry and personal mistrust', unable to develop an effective coordinating machinery.[17] Wilson had Lloyd George's backing, but Haig and Robertson had significant support in the country and at Court. Robertson dominated the Army Council, the body which effectively ran the British Army machine, and ensured it made life difficult for Wilson and his staff. As this thesis shows, despite the hurdles placed in his way, and thanks in part to initial apathy amongst Britain's Allies on the War Council, Wilson's strategic views dominated the business of the SWC between November 1917 and February 1918, when he became CIGS. It resulted in more than a dozen Joint Notes (JNs), policy documents covering a range of important, sometimes prosaic, subjects. Two, JN1 and JN12, put paid to the prospect of another major Allied offensive in the west in 1918. It also stymied Lloyd George's hopes for new large-scale offensives in the Middle East and elsewhere. The SWC model for inter-Allied cooperation was far from perfect, but it was considered effective enough to have been revived at the start of the Second World War in 1939.

Wilson's hand was strengthened when Georges Clemenceau became French Prime Minister at the end of 1917. He developed a nuanced relationship with the 'Tiger', one which helped preserve the Anglo-French alliance at a time of extreme stress. French resources were stretched to

[17] William Philpott, 'The Supreme War Council and the Allied War Effort, 1939-40', in Philippe Chassaigne, and Michael Dockrill, (eds.), *Anglo-French Relations 1898-1998: From Fashoda to Jospin* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 109.

breaking point and Clemenceau, although 'a prickly ally', appreciated the need to nurture the alliance, as did his army's Chief of Staff (CoS) Ferdinand Foch.[18] Wilson took a similarly pragmatic view. Thus, just as in the first 18 months of the war, Wilson's skills as a soldier-diplomat came to the fore, acting as both lightning rod and catalyst between two mercurial Prime Ministers. This was particularly relevant in the seemingly endless dispute over the British taking over more of the French front. Wilson reminded the politicians of the importance of doing more to meet French demands, but defended the British position at a time of acute manpower shortages. It was a difficult balancing act. As CIGS, he was horrified by the lack of men for the front and the determination of the government to prioritise naval and other sections of the war economy at the expense of the Army. Throughout the war he had criticised politicians for their failure, as he saw it, to deploy conscription energetically. Once at the War Office this was an abiding theme.

A logical, but by no means inevitable concomitant of the creation of inter-Allied strategic planning, through the auspices of the SWC, was the establishment of unity of command. For most of the war Wilson was no more an advocate of this model for strategy implementation than any other senior British soldier. Nonetheless, when the Allies were under greatest pressure following the shock of the German 1918 Spring Offensive, he was a key influence in Haig accepting Foch as Allied 'Generalissimo'.[19]

[18] Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen and Leadership in Wartime* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2003 [2002]), p. 90.
[19] Foch's title of 'Général en Chef des Armées Alliées' was agreed by Lloyd George on 14 April and formalised on 22 April 1918; he was appointed Marshal of France on 5 August

Foch and Wilson had been friends for more than a decade. It meant that as CIGS Wilson could deploy his diplomatic skills to neutralise, or at least soften, French criticism of British efforts. Once again, however, Wilson was no dupe. His defence of the British interest led to several serious spats between the two. Had it not been for their relationship the Anglo-French partnership might have foundered just when it was most needed.

STRUCTURE

The thesis comprises six substantive chapters, with a thematic structure. This was chosen in preference to a chronological approach to allow for concentration on subject areas in which Wilson's contribution is under-represented in the literature. The preliminary chapter considers Wilson's military and political networks; the allies, friends and confidants who helped shape his strategic thinking. Also discussed are Wilson's opponents, both soldiers and politicians. Wilson's detractors have placed great emphasis on his 'politicking'. This chapter aims to put the subject in context and argues that Wilson was far from unique in deploying 'intrigue' to achieve his goals. The second chapter examines the creation of the SWC; the result of Lloyd George's desire to regain control of British strategy on the Western Front. Wilson was principal architect of this body which, as is discussed in Chapter Three, had a major role in the development of war policy in the winter of 1917-18. Wilson and his team dominated the work of the joint secretariat of the SWC and produced a

1918, Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command: The Forging of a First World War General* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 316 and 406.

significant body of work designed to enhance inter-allied co-operation. A theme which had both enabled and confined allied strategy throughout the war was that of manpower. Chapter Four considers this fundamentally important issue in the latter stages of the conflict, when British and French resources were under severe pressure and the USA's contribution to the war effort was problematic. Wilson's presence in this debate was coloured by his abiding interest in the politics of Ireland, the land of his birth; a 'blind spot' where his normally sound political judgement deserted him. The fifth chapter examines another consistent strand in the Anglo-French Alliance, the notion of unity of command. Wilson, in line with other British officers, opposed the concept but had argued since 1915 for a more structured, holistic approach to Allied war planning. Only in 1918, in the face of unprecedented pressure on the Alliance caused by the German March offensive, did Wilson accept the need for unity of command embodied in his friend Foch. The final chapter considers theatres beyond the Western Front where, as CIGS, Wilson had to balance the challenges of the 1918 war effort with Britain's Imperial post-war future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Wilson played a key role in the British Army's planning for a continental war and during the conflict held several senior and influential positions. Inevitably therefore there are few scholarly works on strategic and command issues of the Great War in which his name does not feature. Very often, however, Wilson's notorious 'scheming' and penchant for 'mischief' colours the writing, effectively blurring the overall view of a

soldier who at the time had at least as many loyal admirers as detractors.[20] Too often Wilson appears as a one-dimensional figure, descriptions of his personal characteristics masking close analysis of his professional views and actions. Specifically, too many works interpret Wilson's of-the-moment comments in his private diary both as a reflection of his considered views and, by extension, evidence of his subsequent conduct. Whether this is a reasonable assumption is at the heart of this thesis. The research attempts to fill in the gaps in Wilson's Great War career, concentrating not on his party-political ambitions but on the execution of his military responsibilities, with reference to his interest in and contribution to military strategy and higher level, or grand strategy.

Wilson began the war as Sub-Chief of Staff to the BEF's C-in-C Field Marshal Sir John French, and spent much of 1915 as Principal British Liaison Officer with the French Army. He spent 1916 in the unfamiliar role of battlefield commander, as General Officer Commanding (GOC) IV Corps in a quiet sector of the Western Front around Arras. An uneventful year was enlivened only by the embarrassing loss of a kilometre of front line trench to a German attack.[21] The incident confirmed, if confirmation were needed, that whatever skills Wilson might have he did not excel in commanding large bodies of men. He spent much of 1917 in varied,

[20] The Secretary to the War Cabinet, Sir Maurice Hankey, called Wilson an 'arch intriguer', Stephen W. Roskill, *Hankey: Man of Secrets; Vol. I, 1877-1918* (London: Collins, 1970), p. 238; Beaverbrook condemned him as 'a schemer and intriguer both', Lord Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War: 1914-1916* (London: Oldbourne Book Co, 1960), p. 192.
[21] J.E. Edmonds, *Official History of the War: Military Operations France and Belgium, 1916, vol. 1* (London: Macmillan, 1932), pp. 210-226.

unfulfilling roles until his fortunes finally changed in the autumn with the creation by the Allied governments of an overarching body charged with developing a higher direction for war policy, the SWC. Most works concerned with the SWC have credited Wilson with being one of the principal figures in its creation, but while several outlined its functions and defined role, details of the day to day activities of this body, and the work of Wilson in particular, are limited. William Philpott noted its role in initiating a 'more dynamic management' of the coalition war effort, but passed over Wilson's contribution.[22] Jeffery acknowledged that the SWC 'completed much useful, mostly prosaic, work towards the promotion of an efficient and well coordinated war effort.'[23] Whether this work was common-place or not is considered in this thesis. Meanwhile, the contribution of this effort towards greater Allied co-operation and ultimate victory has received limited critical attention. Wilson's role in steering the Council towards the contentious issue of allied strategic unity, and ultimately unity of command, is deserving of further study.

One element of this thesis considers Wilson's actions in the role of CIGS from February 1918 until the end of the war. These 10 months culminated in 'the greatest military victory in British history.'[24] Wilson's role in this period merits more nuanced study than is available in the literature, where

[22] William Philpott, 'Marshal Ferdinand Foch and Allied Victory' in Matthew Hughes and Matthew Seligmann (eds.), *Leadership in Conflict 1914-1918* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2000), p. 39.
[23] Keith Jeffery (ed.), *The Military Correspondence of Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson: 1918-1922* (hereafter *MCHW*) (London: The Bodley Head for the Army Records Society, 1985), p. 17.
[24] Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War: Myths and Realities* (London: Headline, 2001), p. 263.

too often he is painted either as too senior and detached to be of relevance in a fast-developing war of manoeuvre, or a mere cipher for both British politicians, and Foch, the ultimate 'Generalissimo' of the Allied armies on the Western Front. The period is examined in the context of the wider responsibilities of the CIGS, a subject which has received scant attention in the historiography. Wilson, and his predecessor Robertson, were not only concerned with the conduct of the war on the Western Front, but also in all other theatres, including Italy, Salonika, the Middle East (principally Palestine and Mesopotamia), and the turmoil in various regions of formerly Tsarist Russia. These campaigns, in some cases distractions, in others major diversions, were part of Wilson's workload in 1918. An analysis of how he balanced these with his responsibility to the war on the Western Front is a comparatively neglected area of study but is essential in properly assessing his effectiveness.

For a figure whose name appears so frequently in the historiography, Wilson has attracted surprisingly few modern biographers, but more than certain other key figures in the British military elite, such as Henry Rawlinson or Hubert Plumer. The most recent, and by far the most scholarly, examination of his life, by Keith Jeffery, foregoes a detailed examination of his military and strategic influence in favour of an exhaustive analysis of his often overt political activity, with particular reference to his lifelong interest in Irish Unionist politics.[25] The impact of

[25] Jeffery, *Wilson*.

the first Wilson biography on his reputation has already been noted.[26] Two others, dating from the 1960's, before many official archives were open to scholars, followed a similar line to Callwell, quoting extensively from Wilson's indiscreet diaries while offering only limited strategic context and analysis.[27] The fifth work on Wilson concentrated on his assassination and the political events leading up to it. Perhaps inevitably it is of limited value to the focus of this research.[28] Brock Millman's article on Wilson's role in the creation of the SWC made a valuable contribution to the subject but omitted an analysis of Wilson's strategic influence once in a position of real power.[29]

This relative dearth of writing specific to Wilson means that a review of the historiography of his military career must also look to the biographies of his contemporaries, both soldiers and statesmen, studies of the military and political events with which he was concerned, and works on the organisational structures within which he operated. From the relative molehill of Wilson biography, the researcher is faced with a veritable mountain of associated material. As a result, this review is limited to those works considered of direct relevance to Wilson's impact on British strategy in the last 18 months of the war. The development of Wilson's career in the build-up to the war, and its first three years was excluded from detailed study in part because this entailed too broad a remit. Secondly, there is

[26] Jeffery, *Wilson*, pp. 292-3.
[27] Basil Collier, *Brasshat* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1961), and Bernard Ash, *The Lost Dictator: Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson* (London: Cassell, 1968).
[28] Rex Taylor, *Assassination* (London: Hutchinson, 1961).
[29] Millman, 'Wilson's Mischief'.

already a growing body of modern scholarship available on the development of the British Army between the end of the Boer War and its involvement in the early phase of the Great War.[30] By contrast, this author believes, the historiography of Wilson's military career in the final 18 months of the war offers greater scope for further study.

As noted, the best biography of Wilson, and the most recent, is Jeffery's. It addressed key phases in Wilson's Great War career. A single chapter was devoted to his role as British PMR to the SWC, and as CIGS from February 1918 until the end of the war. The sub-title '*A Political Soldier*' summed up the work's primary focus. The author's Preface made clear his focus: 'This biography seeks to assess Wilson's life and career in the light of more complete evidence than hitherto available, and to place him clearly in his social, national and political context.' Thus, the study laid more emphasis on Wilson's 'political' activities than on his strategic thought, although the latter was not ignored. Jeffery said the work aimed to illuminate many aspects of modern Britain, including civil-military relations, social and political linkages with the 'Establishment', the role of the Irish Protestant Ascendancy in the British military, 'and the problems posed by Irish nationalism and Ulster unionism to the United Kingdom during the first quarter of the twentieth century.'[31] The result is an analysis of Wilson's prominent and developing role in Ireland's political tribulations.

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[30] Timothy Bowman and Mark Connelly, *The Edwardian Army: Recruiting, Training and Deploying the British Army, 1902-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Stephen Badsey, *Doctrine and Reform in the British Cavalry 1880-1918* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); Spencer Jones, *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army 1899-1914* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012).
[31] Jeffery, *Wilson*, p. viii.

Wilson's relationship in the final two years of the war with Lloyd George is covered in some detail, particularly his role as stalking horse for the premier's wish to break the Haig-Robertson alliance. The book has many strengths. Its weaknesses, if they are such, are centred on the priority given to the political elements *vis a vis* the military elements of Wilson's career. This thesis aims to complement Jeffery's seminal study.

Another area offering potential for further study is the chapter covering both Wilson's role in the creation and functioning of the SWC, and as CIGS. A total of 25 pages were devoted to this 12-month period (from late October 1917), the most important in Wilson's military career. An otherwise positive review by David R. Woodward criticised the 'thin treatment' of Wilson's leadership as CIGS.[32] While it would be wrong to suggest that verbosity is an indicator of quality, the brevity of this section offers scope for further scrutiny of key strategic issues. These include Wilson's role in championing, and then developing, the notion of 'unity of command' on the Western Front, the rationale for the attempted creation of a Strategic Reserve controlled by the SWC, and planning for the Allies' campaigns in 1918 and 1919. Wilson's influence and decision-making during the British setbacks of March and April 1918 were passed over lightly, as was his role in preparations for, and during the Allied counteroffensives from August onwards. Once in post at the War Office, Wilson's contribution to greater co-operation between the Allied

[32] David R. Woodward, review of *Wilson* in *Journal of Military History*, April 2009, vol. 73 (2), pp. 665-666.

commanders merits further examination, as does its impact. Another area that received limited attention from Jeffery, is Wilson's responsibilities for the conduct of the war in other theatres. The Italian campaign was considered in the context of pressure on manpower and resources in the latter part of 1917, but other theatres received only cursory attention. As with his predecessor Robertson, Wilson's brief as CIGS was wide, with contending demands and a Prime Minister looking for ways to win the war at 'acceptable' cost. One area that has received some attention is the campaign in the Middle East, particularly Palestine, where Lloyd George believed military progress might be made at limited cost. Matthew Hughes showed that Wilson and Robertson had differing views to the Prime Minister.[33] Nonetheless, details of Wilson's work in these theatres are scant across a historiography dominated by strategy on the Western Front.

Jeffery assessed Wilson's time as DMO, in a chapter entitled 'Politics, the Irish Question, and War'.[34] His work on preparing plans for the BEF's deployment to France at the outbreak of war received detailed discussion, but Wilson's role in the Curragh Incident of March 1914 dominated the section. By contrast, Roy A. Prete concentrated on Wilson's role while DMO in working with the French on plans for the BEF's complement, mobilisation, initial location on the continent and its role on the left wing of

[33] Matthew Hughes, *Allenby and British Strategy in the Middle East 1917-1919* (London: Frank Cass, 1999).
[34] Jeffery, *Wilson*, pp. 107-130.

the French Army.[35] Prete argued that while Wilson did much to reassure the French about his country's intentions if Germany attacked, planning was ultimately defective due to the British government's failure to make firm policy decisions. The result was that, 'The French Staff merely made demands and Wilson, on behalf of the British Staff, made every effort to comply.'[36] The result of this apparent misunderstanding over what were good intentions and what were firm commitments was never ironed out prior to the outbreak of war. As a result, the French were disappointed when their expectations of British commitment were not always met, or at least not with the alacrity they expected. These doubts were an abiding theme in Anglo-French relations throughout the war. As this thesis will demonstrate, there were plenty of occasions when misunderstanding and frustration found Wilson smoothing frayed relations between British and French commanders.[37] The soldier-diplomat was a role in which Wilson excelled, and one he played for much of the war. The historiography of inter-allied liaison work is extensive and focused on the work of key individuals. Interestingly, the liaison work of arguably the most influential British officer, Wilson, has received little detailed attention until now.[38]

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[35] Roy A. Prete, 'French Strategic Planning and the Deployment of the BEF in France in 1914', *Canadian Journal of History*, XXIV, April 1989, pp. 42-62, and idem., *Strategy and Command: the Anglo-French Coalition on the Western Front 1914* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009).
[36] Prete, 'French Strategic Planning', p. 44.
[37] Richard Holmes, *The Little Field Marshal: A Life of Sir John French*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981), pp. 208-209; Gary Sheffield and John Spencer, 'Soldiers and Politicians in Strife: The Case of Henry Wilson in 1915', in Peter Liddle (ed.), *Britain and the Widening War, 1915-1916: From Gallipoli to the Somme* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2016), pp. 83-99.
[38] Works on inter-allied liaison include: Major-General Sir Edward Spears, *Liaison 1914: A Narrative of the Great Retreat* (London: Cassell, 1999 [1930]); idem, *Prelude to Victory*, (London: Cape, 1939); Max Egremont, *Under Two Flags: The Life of Major-General Sir Edward Spears* (London: Phoenix, 1998 [1997]); General [Victor J.M.] Huguet, *Britain and the War: A French Indictment* (London: Cassell, 1928); Charles Seymour, (ed.), *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House: Into the World War – April 1917-June 1918* (vol. 3) (London: Ernest Benn, 1928); Elizabeth Greenhalgh, (ed. and trans.), *Liaison: General*

Books of less direct value in reassessing Wilson's military effectiveness include the three main biographies which preceded Jeffery's work. According to Jeffery, Callwell's 'official' biography painted a picture of a man who was an 'over-ambitious, self-serving monster, with such violent passions and prejudices as to appear at times actually unbalanced.'[39] There is no doubt that Callwell's work, which called extensively on Wilson's 41 manuscript diaries, has provided a handy if simplistic character portrait.[40] The book itself, while quoting liberally from the diaries, comprised a detailed résumé of Wilson's life. Often, diary extracts appear to have been chosen as much for their colourful tone as for their value in illuminating and informing the accompanying narrative. Almost inevitably, considering the era in which he was writing, Callwell told his story from a personal angle with limited referencing of source material. Most importantly from the perspective of this research, Wilson's actions and responses to events were recorded with little if any analysis of broader motivational context, or their effects.

Basil Collier wrote *Brasshat* before he had access to the wealth of material in the official archives. The narrative, while detailed, included little analysis of events and their causes and effects. An important limitation was the lack of historiographical referencing. Collier's was a sympathetic

Pierre des Vallieres at British General Headquarters, 1916-1917 (Stroud: The History Press for the Army Records Society, 2016).

[39] Jeffery, *Wilson*, p. vii.

[40] The diaries, now held at the Imperial War Museum (IWM), (HHW 1) cover the years 1893-1922: subsequent citations are described as 'Wilson diary'; Jeffery, *MCHW*, p. ix.

biography, too often coming down on the side of his subject when evidence pointed to the contrary. Field Marshal Lord Kitchener's accurate prediction that the war would be a long one, as opposed to Wilson's assessment that it would be short and bloody was dismissed as 'the uninstructed guess of a man who must differ from the majority at all costs, while Wilson's was a sound inference from reliable intelligence. It was only by unforeseeable chance that Wilson was wrong and Kitchener very nearly right.'[41] The chapters devoted to Wilson's role in pre-war planning and his contribution to the BEF's deployment in the first six months of the war were its strongest.

The other main Wilson biography also suffered from being too dependent upon Wilson's diary, unsupported by his correspondence and other primary source material. In *The Lost Dictator* Bernard Ash noted the risks involved: 'The diaries are highly intimate and highly personal and often represent Wilson's private views rather than his public intentions, and …because for the most part the entries were written in haste, following immediately upon occurrences, and therefore did not always represent his more considered thoughts.'[42] Despite the sagacity of this observation, the work sometimes construed much from little detail. Wilson's year as Principal British Liaison Officer with the French in 1915 was, according to Ash, the period during which he began considering the need for greater co-ordination between the Allied armies and, ultimately, the formation of

[41] Collier, *Brasshat*, p. 198.
[42] Ash, *Lost Dictator*, p. v.

the SWC. While the personal diaries support this suggestion, Ash went further and construed that the liaison role held 'the key to power in the military operations of the Western Front.' If the co-ordination of the Allied armies rested in him, Wilson could be more powerful than the BEF's C-in-C Sir John French or his French counterpart General Joseph Joffre: 'He could be a more powerful person than Asquith or Kitchener.'[43] Wilson's role was important and influential, but it is far-fetched to suggest that it was as pivotal as Ash claimed. Equally, there is no specific reference in his diaries to indicate that Wilson, despite his tendency to hubris, viewed his position in 1915 so loftily. Ash further claimed that the SWC had such power that in late 1917 and early 1918 Wilson, with Foch controlling France's military representative General Maxime Weygand, 'were for all practical purposes in control of Allied military operations.'[44] Wilson might have wished it was so, but, as this thesis discusses, the claim is in stark contrast to the facts. The book's least convincing argument, however, was enshrined in its title. Wilson's strong views on the future of Ireland meant that he was feted by, and had strong sympathies with, the Conservative and Unionist Party, and in 1922 eventually became one of its MPs, for the Ulster seat of North Down. Diary comments and his political views generally would undoubtedly be considered reactionary today, but they were not unusual in an Edwardian officer and gentleman. From these unguarded personal diary entries and remarks to friends and acquaintances, Ash speculated on a post-war world in which Wilson, had

[43] Ash, *Lost Dictator*, p. 181.
[44] Ibid., p. 240.

he lived, would have taken effortless control of his party, then the country, attempted a 'reconquest of Ireland, the subjugation of India, Egypt and other lands' accompanied at home by 'military confrontation with the forces of organised labour.'[45] This conclusion, which underpins the whole work, was best summed up by a more scholarly historian: 'Ash's fanciful prediction that Wilson might have become some sort of quasi-fascist leader, while it may well have been a useful device to sell his biography, is absurd.'[46]

The historiography on this period in the development of the British Army and the administrative structures that underpinned it, is substantial, with Wilson given credit for the efficient deployment of forces in August 1914.[47] John Gooch characterised Wilson as the first DMO to display the 'tenets of the General Staff mind as it was understood in Germany'.[48] The performance of the BEF has been much studied. For some historians, the 'Old Contemptibles' of 1914 were let down by their commanders. Tim Travers argued that senior officers brought an Edwardian culture to the battlefield, one at odds with the industrialised nature of modern conflict.[49] Nikolas Gardner developed the theme and further suggested that at the highest levels of command, personal rivalry often worked to the detriment of concerted action and effective operational control. According to

[45] Ash, *Lost Dictator*, pp. 278-279.
[46] Jeffery, *Wilson*, p. 295.
[47] Brian Bond, *The Victorian Army and the Staff College 1854-1914* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972), and Jones, *Tactical Reform*.
[48] Gooch, *Plans of War*, p. 289.
[49] Tim Travers, *The Killing Ground: The British Army, the Western Front and the Emergence of Modern War 1900-1918* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987).

Gardner, the ambitious and self-serving Wilson, as Sub-Chief of General Staff in the BEF, undermined his superior, Sir Archibald Murray.[50] Gardner noted that several of Wilson's colleagues from his time as DMO formed the nucleus of the staff of the Operations section at GHQ. As a result, he contended, this partisan group looked to Wilson rather than Murray for guidance, something that wore down the latter's authority. Thus, Wilson gained undue influence over Field Marshal French, to the detriment of the BEF. While accepting that Murray was undermined by Wilson, a recent essay has argued convincingly that there is little evidence of Wilson's 'influence' resulting in Sir John changing policy in response to his advice.[51]

One of the major characteristics of the Great War was that it was a conflict of coalitions. From the start France and Britain were dependent upon each other. Initially, due to the size of the French Army, the British were junior members of the Allied coalition on the Western Front. As Britain's contribution grew, so did her influence and ability to take greater control of events. By mid-1917 the BEF took on the lion's share of the fighting. Nonetheless, ensuring a degree of equanimity between Paris and London was a constant challenge for military commanders and politicians. Scholars are in accord that over the four and a half years of the war Wilson played a role in addressing this challenge. There is less agreement in the historiography about the periods when this engagement was

[50] Nikolas Gardner, *Trial by Fire: Command and the British Expeditionary Force in 1914* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), pp. 5-7.
[51] Brian Curragh, 'Henry Wilson's War', in Spencer Jones (ed.), *Stemming the Tide: Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914* (Solihull: Helion, 2013), p. 87.

particularly active, and even less about when it had an appreciable impact – for better or worse. One area where Wilson had a long-standing involvement was the debate on the notion of 'unity of command'. His view, his diaries and correspondence suggest, was that closer Anglo-French co-operation should be encouraged rather than feared. As the war progressed, his thoughts developed from the *ad hoc* and informal, based for the most part on personal relationships, towards support for more formalised structures; until late 1917 Wilson was walking a lonely road.

William Philpott's contribution to understanding the genesis and development of the concept of Allied unity of command offered a comprehensive view of Wilson's involvement in the preparation of Anglo-French plans for war with Germany, and of the first 18 months of the conflict.[52] Describing Wilson as deserving of his 'historical reputation as an ardent Francophile and self-important, outspoken, ambitious political intriguer,' he detailed the gulf between government policy makers and military planners.[53] Wilson's appointment in early 1915 as the BEF's Principal Liaison Officer to French Army Headquarters, the *Grand Quartier General* (GQG), was, according to Philpott, the formalisation of a function he had carried out unofficially since the beginning of the war 'smoothing out differences between the headquarters as they arose'. Much less credible is the suggestion by one of Wilson's contemporaries, quoted by Philpott, that he was now so influential that he was 'virtually [British]

[52] William Philpott, *Anglo-French Relations and Strategy on the Western Front, 1914-18* (London: Macmillan, 1996).
[53] Ibid., p. 4.

Commander-in-Chief under Joffre'.[54] Philpott's central thesis, that French strategy dominated military decision-making throughout the war, while a matter of ongoing debate, effectively minimised Wilson's role in the later stages of the conflict. Much of the book concentrated on the period 1914-16, with less attention devoted to the final two years of the war. Unsurprisingly therefore, Wilson's work at the SWC, and as CIGS, was passed over lightly, with Foch emerging as a Generalissimo employing consensus rather than coercion to achieve for the first time a functioning co-operative relationship between the Allied armies. Wilson's own contribution to Allied policy-making thanks to his long-established friendship with Foch and his important role as the British government's chief military advisor, is not considered. The omission offers scope for further study and will be addressed in this work.

Elizabeth Greenhalgh's recent biography of Foch echoed Philpott's characterisation of the Marshal while Generalissimo from March 1918 as a conciliator who was able to transcend national self-interest for the greater good; a skill which led to victory on the Western Front.[55] Here, the Wilson-Foch relationship is more nuanced with Wilson shown as being anything but a willing dupe to his French friend's policies, the pair often disagreeing profoundly, albeit usually good naturedly. The 1918 Anglo-French dispute over the availability or otherwise of additional British manpower is handled in depth. Foch's role in the controversy is rounded and detailed; Wilson's

[54] Lieutenant-Commander Wedgwood, 'Report on visit to France and Belgium, 8 October 1915, quoted in Philpott, *Anglo-French Relations*, p. 96.
[55] Greenhalgh, *Foch*.

less so. As senior soldier at the War Office, Wilson held direct responsibility for the military aspects of this issue and his actions in spring 1918 over the manpower crisis will receive more analysis in this thesis.[56] Greenhalgh addressed Foch's relationship with Haig, implying that not only did the British C-in-C welcome the fact that the Allied armies finally had a single authority in Foch but from henceforth took a junior and subservient role. Conversely, Haig's most recent biographer has pointed out that Foch's respect for his British colleague grew over the summer of 1918 to the point at which he was 'exerting real influence on the generalissimo's strategy.'[57] Wilson's contribution to this developing relationship, and to the broader co-operative working between other Allied senior commanders and politicians, has been passed over in the historiography and will be addressed in this study.

Greenhalgh devoted a significant part of an earlier book to the formation of the SWC and the development of Foch's powers following his formal appointment as generalissimo on 14 April 1918.[58] There are valuable insights into the creation of, and tensions in the functioning of, the Versailles body, but it is ultimately dismissed as a 'talking shop',[59] an interesting contrast to Jeffery's verdict on the Council's work. The book reveals the author's scholarship of the French military and political scene

[56] The manpower crisis of 1918 and the subsequent 'Maurice Affair' is related in highly partisan terms in Nancy Maurice (ed.), *The Maurice Case: From the Papers of Major-General Sir Frederick Maurice* (London: Leo Cooper, 1972).
[57] Gary Sheffield, *The Chief: Douglas Haig and the British Army* (London: Aurum Press, 2011), p. 313.
[58] Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Victory Through Coalition: Britain and France during the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 316.
[59] Ibid., p. 179.

during the Great War that is not always mirrored in evaluation of British protagonists. For example, the decision to replace Wilson as Britain's PMR to the SWC with Sir Henry Rawlinson is described as 'bizarre' but the probable result of Haig preferring to 'have one of his own men at Versailles'.[60] In fact, while Rawlinson was undoubtedly one of Haig's 'most important lieutenants', their relationship was nuanced.[61] In March 1915 Haig had saved Rawlinson's career after the battle of Neuve Chapelle and as a result the junior officer was to some extent 'beholden' to the C-in-C.[62] Nonetheless, Rawlinson remained his own man. While Haig might have been content to see Rawlinson at Versailles, Wilson would also have welcomed the appointment, the latter two having been friends since 1886.[63]

Considerable scholarly attention has been paid to the strategic aims of Britain's political leaders, together with the impacts of these changing priorities on war policy. As a senior officer with as many political friends - and enemies - as military ones, Wilson was deeply concerned with, and often involved in, these issues. Samuel R. Williamson's book considered relationship-building at governmental and military levels in the run-up to the war, and the contribution of Wilson's work as DMO.[64] David French

[60] Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition*, p. 179.
[61] Gary Sheffield, *Command and Morale: The British Army on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2014), pp. 37-53, and idem, *The Chief*, p. 110.
[62] See also Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson 1914-1918* (London: Blackwell, 1992), p. 72, and J.P. Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 125-127.
[63] Jeffery, *MCHW*, p. 2.
[64] S.R. Williamson Jr., The *Politics of Grand Strategy: Britain and France Prepare for War 1904-1914* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969).

adopted a similar interpretation of the first two and a half years of the conflict, observing that the pre-war failure to define a formal alliance between Britain and France impacted negatively on the fighting efficiency of the Allied armies.[65] He paid particular attention to the British government's dilemma in favouring, as in previous conflicts, a 'limited war', contributing economically but keeping the human cost to a minimum, while over time being gradually pulled into a much deeper conflict by the inevitable demands of its main ally.[66] The book questioned the 'Easterner-Westerner' distinction commonly applied to both politicians and senior soldiers as too simplistic. French's companion volume, covering the period of Lloyd George's coalition government continued the theme of characterising the 'East-West' debate as one concerned more with limiting casualties than simply territorial in nature.[67] French asserted that a 'pivotal' figure in favour of a Western Front-only policy was Wilson's predecessor as CIGS, Robertson. Wilson, French contended, believed that the war would be won in the west but that significant progress to that end might be achieved by additional campaigns elsewhere; a perspective that found favour with Lloyd George. In fact, as this thesis aims to demonstrate, once Wilson had both influence and power he paid lip-service to the notion of offensives on multiple fronts, while doing little to enhance it.

[65] David French, *British Strategy and War Aims: 1914-1916* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986).
[66] Perhaps the classic work on the theory of limited military commitment is Basil Liddell Hart, *The British Way in Warfare* (London: Faber & Faber, 1932).
[67] David French, *The Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition, 1916-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press at Oxford University Press, 1995).

The apparent proximity of views between Wilson and the Prime Minister, and the events that stemmed from them, received extensive coverage in Woodward's *Lloyd George and the Generals*.[68] Wilson ended 1916 effectively unemployed following his period as commander of IV Corps. The first half of 1917 saw him participate in a fruitless diplomatic mission to Tsarist Russia, followed by a short-lived role as Chief of the British Mission to the French Army. The latter posting was another in which Wilson's familiarity with the French language, the country's politics and its army were put to good use. Lloyd George created the role for Wilson to smooth British support for the planned spring campaign of France's new C-in-C Robert Nivelle. The appointment ended once the offensive failed to achieve its ambitious objectives and its architect was dismissed. According to Woodward, Wilson's career revived under Lloyd George for three main reasons. Firstly, they shared a similar temperament, in contrast to some of the more reserved senior British Army officers with whom the Prime Minister did business. Secondly, Lloyd George's preferred war policy disagreed profoundly with that advocated by his two most senior officers, Haig and Robertson.[69] Thirdly, Lloyd George, ever searching for a less costly way of winning the war, needed an ally who not only apparently sympathised with his views but who was willing to see them to fruition. Whether Wilson fitted this description as perfectly as Woodward suggests, is considered in this thesis.

[68] David R. Woodward, *Lloyd George and the Generals* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1983).
[69] Woodward, *Lloyd George*, pp. 243-4.

The familiar narrative of Wilson's appointment to the position of the government's principal military advisor is best told in Woodward's work on Robertson, the man he effectively usurped in February 1918, and will not be repeated in this study.[70] When Robertson was appointed CIGS in December 1915 he ensured that his powers were much greater than those of his predecessors. The three previous occupants for the post since the outbreak of war had found themselves over-ruled, over-looked and over-shadowed by the Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener. By the time of Robertson's appointment Kitchener's conduct of the war, in political and military circles if not in the public mind, was discredited. In addition, Robertson was a more robust character than his predecessors.[71] The result was that in future the government received military advice directly from the CIGS, and that Robertson issued orders to the Army, albeit under the Secretary of State's authority.[72] This latter point was of great significance as the war progressed; as Robertson's stature grew no Secretary of State felt powerful enough to challenge him. This situation was greatly resented by Lloyd George who ensured that when Wilson replaced Robertson this latter power was rescinded and returned to the political head of the military.

Wilson's network of friendships and alliances amongst both his fellow officers and politicians has been little studied in the historiography, and yet

[70] David R. Woodward, *Field Marshal Sir William Robertson: Chief of the Imperial General Staff in the Great War* (Westport CT: Praeger, 1998), pp. 187-201.
[71] For Kitchener's domination of the General Staff at the War Office see George H. Cassar, *The Tragedy of Sir John French* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985), pp. 85-6.
[72] Woodward, *Robertson*, p. 24.

is essential in understanding why he finally rose to exercise both power and influence in 1917. The next chapter looks to shine a light on this neglected area for what it reveals about Wilson's military effectiveness.

CHAPTER ONE

WILSON AND HIS NETWORKS

The image of Wilson which dominates the historiography is that of a silver-tongued 'Svengali', winding gullible men - politicians for the most part - around his little finger.[1] His ability to say what his masters wanted to hear, smiling to their faces while rubbishing many of them behind their backs in his diaries, is presented as somehow unique in the British army of the time. This, it is suggested, was not the 'normal' conduct of an officer and a gentleman, and thus Wilson's 'untrustworthiness' stood out as exceptional, maverick behaviour. Such behaviour, it is implied, gave impetus to Wilson's career progression and ultimate appointment to the post of CIGS. Kitchener's biographer George H. Cassar described Wilson as 'Arrogant, presumptious, impatient, given to scheming…[his] intellectual gifts commended him to politicians and equally rendered him suspect to his colleagues and subordinates in the army.'[2] An early historian of the War noted, presumably euphemistically, that Wilson 'the most lucid, supple, and ambitious of British generals, of whom a military colleague cruelly said that he got into a state of sexual excitement whenever he saw a politician.'[3] This chapter considers his network of friends, and foes, in order to illuminate why, until autumn 1917, the trajectory of Wilson's war-

[1] George H. Cassar, *Kitchener's War: British Strategy from 1914 to 1916* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2004), p. 81.
[2] Idem, *Kitchener: Architect of Victory* (London: William Kimber & Co, 1977), p. 229; see also Paul Guinn, *British Strategy and Politics: 1914 to 1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 266, and John Grigg, *Lloyd George: War Leader: 1916-1918* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011 [2002]), pp. 286-287.
[3] C.R.M.F. Cruttwell, *A History of the Great War 1914-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), pp. 500-501; see also, Sir Sam Fay, *The War Office at War* (London: Hutchinson, 1937), p. 100.

time career failed to live up to his pre-war expectations. It will also consider how his fortunes changed once politicians who admired, rather than decried, his 'diplomatic' talents came to the fore.

The commonly accepted view of Wilson's character as exceptional is peculiar, considering the amount of space given over in the historiography to the overt 'politicking' which took place in the British Army of the late-Victorian and early Edwardian period and which continued into the Great War. It is unclear, therefore, why Wilson's love of gossip and ability to make friends of politicians and other men of influence has been considered remarkable for so long. Haig, Hubert Gough, John French, 'Wully' Robertson, all 'politicked' in one way or another before, during - and after - the war. Kitchener's 'capacity for intrigue', most notably against the Viceroy Lord Curzon while the former was C-in-C India was 'notorious'.[4] It would have been unusual had career officers not attempted to further or at least bolster their positions by pulling strings and using friendships to best advantage. As the 'management guru' Charles Handy observed, all organisations comprise 'pressure groups and lobbies, cliques and cabals, rivalries and contests, clashes of personality and bonds of alliance. It would be odd if it were not so, and foolish of anyone to pretend that in some ideal world those differences would not exist.'[5] What was true

[4] Hew Strachan, *The Politics of the British Army* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 126; see also Kenneth Rose, *Superior Person: a Portrait of Curzon and his Circle in late Victorian England* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969); Kitchener was C-in-C India 1902-9.
[5] Charles Handy, *Understanding Organizations* (Fourth Edition) (London: Penguin 1993 [1976]), p. 291.

when Handy was writing was true in the First World War. It remains so today.

Far from the pariah his post-war reputation would suggest he ought to have been, Wilson had many long-standing friendships with both fellow officers and politicians. Inevitably, under the pressure of the greatest military conflict Britain had ever faced, these friendships came under stress from time to time. Despite this, and significantly, the vast majority of these friendships survived the war. Indisputably he also had enemies; some of them very powerful. His love of gossip and displays of self-assurance sometimes bordering on arrogance meant he was not to everybody's taste. Nonetheless, if Wilson was as evidently duplicitous a character as his enemies suggested, it is difficult to understand why Winston Churchill, Foch, Hankey and Lord Milner all remained loyal to him in the post-war period, and to his memory after his death. The truth is that Wilson was extremely adept at playing the 'political' game, but so were his peers. As Hew Strachan noted, the Curragh Incident 'emphasised that the British army entered the First World War deeply politicised and well versed in the arts of political intrigue.'[6] This was so because most senior officers had a 'penchant for intrigue and lobbying', in part a legacy of the organisation's imperial history and the resulting tension between centralising authority in London and the long-established independence of the Indian Army. Wilson was the soldier 'who most obviously acted as the bridge between the politics of empire and the politics of integrated control'.

[6] Strachan, *Politics*, p. 116.

Simply put, in an example of his familiar role as a bridge between opposing positions, Wilson was able to reconcile the near-autonomy of the old Victorian Army of Empire with a modern organisation founded on a clearly-defined partnership between politicians and soldiers. Schooled by Lord Roberts, he 'brought the in-fighting skills of his mentor to bear on the problems of grand strategy and coalition warfare'.[7] Significantly, and the historiography fails to give due emphasis to this point, Wilson was unable to apply these 'skills' to full effect until the last 18 months of the war. Only then, when politicians and soldiers who took a similar strategic view to his came to prominence, did Wilson achieve true power and influence.

MILITARY NETWORKS

Along with his contemporaries, Wilson's network of friends and allies was built on the foundations of his early military service, interlocking circles of relationships which touched and often melded. The senior ranks of the British Army at the end of the nineteenth century were riven with factionalism.[8] Pre-eminent were the so-called 'rings' composed of acolytes of Lords Roberts and Wolseley.[9] Wilson was a member of the 'Roberts Ring', serving as his private secretary in South Africa. These informal groupings served as nurturing grounds for promising young officers who found their careers assisted by powerful mentors.[10] Stephen Badsey noted

[7] Strachan, *Politics*, p. 124.
[8] Badsey, *Doctrine*, Strachan, *Politics*, and Bond, *Staff College*.
[9] Field Marshal Sir Garnet Wolseley (1833-1913), succeeded the Duke of Cambridge as Commander-in-Chief of the Forces in 1895; Field Marshal Lord Roberts V.C. (1832-1914) succeeded Wolseley in 1901. The post was abolished in 1904; see also Badsey, *Doctrine*, p. 35.
[10] Badsey, *Doctrine*, p. 38.

that 'The Chief', as Wilson referred to Roberts, was adept at 'exploiting political contacts and the press to promote his military views and career'. This behaviour was a 'product of the entire nature of the British Army at the start of the twentieth century.' Roberts, like Wilson later, might have been 'an intriguer and a self-advertiser', but while he 'bent the unofficial rules a little further than his opponents and victims felt was comfortable, he neither broke them nor invented them.'[11]

Wilson and Roberts were ardent Unionists opposed to Home Rule for Ireland, where both had been born, and both had firm views on the essential nature of British imperialism.[12] Roberts was a leading figure in the National Service League, which campaigned for compulsory military training on the continental model, a subject dear to Wilson's heart and one he took every opportunity to promote both before and during the Great War.[13] The League was closely aligned with Unionist [Conservative] Party politicians, including their wartime leader Andrew Bonar Law, the MP and historian Leo Amery, and Milner. Interestingly, and further evidence of the range of overtly political views amongst officers at this time, French, Haig and Ian Hamilton all took a sceptical view of the practicalities of conscription in peacetime.[14] Roberts's control of service career opportunities meant that as C-in-C he often advanced, or 'did a job', for

[11] Badsey, *Doctrine*, p. 119.
[12] Strachan, *Politics*, p. 111.
[13] The National Service League was established in 1902, and Roberts became its chairman in 1905; Gregory D. Phillips, *The Diehards: Aristocratic Society and Politics in Edwardian England* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 97-102.
[14] Strachan, *Politics*, p. 110.

loyalists who had served with him.[15] Those who impressed 'Bobs' and benefitted from his support included French, Gough, Hamilton, Henry Rawlinson, Robertson, and Wilson.[16] By contrast Haig was a protégé of Sir Evelyn Wood.[17] Rawlinson, a close friend of Wilson and an acolyte of Roberts, had a 'difficult' nuanced relationship with Haig during the Great War.[18] One of Roberts's Aides-de-Camp (ADCs) in South Africa was Hereward Wake who Wilson chose in the autumn of 1917 as one of his staff in the SWC secretariat. Edward Stanley, another Conservative MP at the turn of the century, was Roberts's private secretary during his time in South Africa. In 1917, as Lord Derby, he replaced Lloyd George as Secretary of State for War. All were to play key roles in the war and in Wilson's career. The officer corps of the British Army in the years before the Great War was a small world in which everybody knew each other. Barriers between groupings were porous and, thanks to the social background of most army officers, most knew politicians as well. Roberts died on a visit to the Western Front in November 1914 with Wilson at his bedside. Wilson was an insignia-bearer at his old chief's funeral.[19]

Another officer who played an important role in Wilson's career, and was especially relevant during the Great War, was Field Marshal Sir John French. He had also served under Roberts when the latter became C-in-C

[15] Badsey, *Doctrine*, pp. 53 and 155; Bowman and Connelly, *Edwardian Army*, p. 35.
[16] Ibid., pp. 156-8, Sheffield, *The Chief*, p. 24, and Jeffery, *Wilson*, p. 39.
[17] Sheffield, *The Chief*, pp. 25-6.
[18] Gary Sheffield, 'Omdurman to Neuve Chapelle: Henry Rawlinson, Douglas Haig and the Making of an Uneasy Command Relationship, 1898-1915', pp. 37-51 in idem. *Command and Morale.*
[19] Wilson diary, 14 and 19 November 1914.

in South Africa. French was 12 years older than Wilson, and his diary references, even negative ones, were couched in the affectionate terms reserved for an elder sibling.[20] Wilson, like many of French's fellow officers, admired his bravery but was often frustrated, and sometimes irritated, by his mercurial temper and mood swings. Nonetheless, they developed a close association in the decade before the war.[21] French played a conflicted but key role in the Curragh Incident, and lost his CIGS post in the process. He had been a friend and supporter of Kitchener but by 1914 there was antipathy between the two. It meant that when French was recalled to command the BEF in France he had little political capital with Asquith or Kitchener to invest in his friend and ally Wilson. At the start of the war Wilson had hoped to become French's CoS. He believed, although there is no direct primary archival evidence, that his role in siding with the Ulster Unionist cause during the Curragh Incident meant Asquith vetoed the appointment.[22] Instead, he secured the new and incongruous position of 'Sub-Chief of Staff' to Lieutenant-General Sir Archibald Murray.[23] This caused confusion and resentment within the BEF's senior command. French was another soldier who was both adept at and willing to play the political card. He precipitated the 'Shells Crisis' of May 1915, embarrassing Kitchener and Asquith, and hastening the end of Britain's last Liberal government.[24] French's failures as C-in-C cost him his command, when in the latter half of 1915 Haig, Robertson and to some

[20] The best modern biography of French is Holmes, *Little Field Marshal*; see also Cassar, *Tragedy*.
[21] Badsey, *Doctrine*, p. 199.
[22] Wilson diary, 30 July 1914.
[23] Jeffery, *Wilson*, p. 132.
[24] Holmes, *Little Field Marshal*, pp. 287-9.

extent Wilson, turned against him; his overt politicking hampered his cause.[25] Resentment at his dismissal lingered. In October 1917, when Lloyd George was casting around for alternative policies to those of the Haig-Robertson partnership, French, in concert with Wilson, was an enthusiastic contributor.[26]

Although on good terms during the Great War, French had not always been a Wilson admirer. In 1904 he condemned Wilson and his close friend Henry Rawlinson because, he believed, they had stood in the way of one of his protégées:

> Now both those fellows did much harm in Roberts' time. They are very clever and were R[obert]'s special "Pets"…these two young gentlemen must have their wings clipped. Their chance is in the weakness of others…[27]

Wilson and Rawlinson met in Burma in 1886 and became lifelong friends.[28] Almost exact contemporaries, and both originally members of 'smart' Greenjacket regiments, their career paths crossed often.[29] Wilson followed Rawlinson, or 'Rawly' as he knew him, as Commandant of the Staff College at Camberley in 1907. There both favoured a broad curriculum which included encouraging officers to consider the political aspects of their duties.[30] Wilson gave a lecture on the vexed question of

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[25] John Spencer, 'Friends Disunited: Johnnie French, Wully Robertson and "K. of K.," in 1915', pp. 80-102 in Spencer Jones, (ed.), *Courage Without Glory: The British Army on the Western Front 1915* (Solihull: Helion, 2015).
[26] See Chapter 2, 'Future Strategy Paper'.
[27] French to Esher, 8 September 1904, (original emphasis), in Holmes, *Little Field Marshal*, p. 127.
[28] Jeffery, *Wilson*, pp. 13, 19-20.
[29] Wilson joined the Rifle Brigade in late 1884, while Rawlinson was in the King's Royal Rifle Corps; see Badsey, *Doctrine,* for a discussion of 'smart' regiments in the British Army, p. 7.
[30] Bond, *Staff College*, pp. 263-6.

conscription to the Staff College on 4 November 1909.[31] Where they differed was Wilson's career followed a staff officer biased trajectory. Rawlinson followed a staff route but also gained combat command experience in South Africa and the Great War. Haig's intelligence chief John Charteris, a Wilson critic, noted 'Rawlinson is a good fighting soldier…, which Wilson is not.'[32] Wilson succeeded Rawlinson in command of IV Corps in 1916 when the latter was elevated to lead Fourth Army in the forthcoming Somme campaign.[33] Later, when the wheel of fortune had turned and he found himself CIGS, Wilson chose Rawly to succeed him as Britain's PMR at the SWC. In fact, once ensconced in the War Office, Wilson was more focussed on making his own strategy than on the views of his erstwhile colleagues at Versailles. Rawlinson, although frustrated, was mollified when Wilson influenced his move from Versailles to the command of Fifth (soon to become Fourth) Army in March 1918 after Hubert Gough's dismissal.[34] They remained on good terms and in July, speculating on the future of General Sir William Birdwood, then commanding Fifth Army, Rawlinson told Wilson 'Don't go and make him C-in-C in India! I want to go there myself after the war!'[35] Rawlinson, due no doubt in part to the help of Wilson, who as CIGS sat on the Army Council which decided such matters, had his wish in 1920. Another valuable ally, particularly when he became CIGS, was his old friend General Sir John

[31] IWM, Wilson papers, HHW 33/3/22, notes of a lecture: 'Is Conscription Necessary?'; Wilson repeated the lecture on 11 July 1910.
[32] Charteris diary, 24 April 1915, in John Charteris, *At GHQ* (London: Cassell, 1931), p. 87.
[33] The most complete modern study of Rawlinson's career is Prior and Wilson, *Rawlinson*.
[34] Sheffield, *Command and Morale*, p. 50.
[35] IWM, Wilson papers, (HHW 2/13A/23), Rawlinson to Wilson, 8 July 1918.

'Jack' Cowans. He was Quartermaster General to the Forces (QMG) throughout the war and a contemporary of Wilson's in the Rifle Brigade.[36]

As in any professional body, progress in the British Army of the early 20th century relied, at least in part, on personal connections. The 'rings' of influence of the late-Victorian period were gradually replaced by less formal 'teams' or 'firms', groupings of officers brought together when the most senior obtained a new post. Rather than patronage based on family connections and money, shared experiences at the Staff College or in previous appointments were the key drivers.[37] Significantly, senior officers did not enjoy free rein to hand-pick their subordinates. Power of appointment lay with the Army Council.[38] Instead, senior officers had to negotiate and lobby for those they wanted. Wilson's Great War career path was, by comparison with many of his peers, fragmentary. Instead of periods in command of units or departments, Wilson hopped from a quasi-staff/liaison role in 1914, to formal Anglo-French liaison in 1915 and then a corps command the following year. In 1917 he toured Russia, liaised again during the Nivelle offensive, was effectively unemployed, had a brief home command and finished the year establishing the British secretariat at the SWC. Unsurprisingly therefore, when he took on the latter role Wilson's 'team' of trusted lieutenants was a limited one.

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[36] Terry Dean, 'General Sir John Steven Cowans', *Stand To!*, 108, (2017), p. 26.
[37] Travers, *Killing Ground*, pp. 6-10.
[38] During the Great War the Army Council comprised military members, headed by the CIGS, the deputy CIGS (from December 1915), the Adjutant General, the QMG, Master General of Ordnance, Director General of Military Aeronautics (from February 1916). The civil members included the Secretary of State for War and his deputy, A.F. Becke, *History of the Great War Based on Official Documents: Order of Battle of Divisions, Part 4, The Army Council, GHQs, Armies and Corps 1914-18* (London: HMSO, 1945), pp 2-3; *The War Office List* (London: HMSO, 1932).

Most important was Sir Charles Sackville-West, known by Wilson as 'Tit Willow'.[39] He had been one of the directing staff at the Staff College and they became firm friends.[40] In 1910 when Wilson moved to the War Office as DMO, Tit Willow joined him.[41] He distinguished himself on the Western Front before Wilson overcame objections from Robertson and the Army Council and made him his CoS at Versailles.[42] As evidence of the ubiquity of 'intriguing' between senior officers, once Wilson had moved to the War Office as CIGS, Sackville-West denounced his successor Rawlinson as a Haig loyalist. He portrayed him as a new Robertson plotting behind Wilson's back and supporting GHQ's offensive strategy: 'Versailles is to become an appanage [sic] or buffer between LG & DH & you are left out... What a pie'.[43] As Sheffield has argued convincingly, this was an incorrect assessment of the complex Rawlinson-Haig relationship.[44] In any case, Wilson paid little attention to the criticism of his old friend and when Rawlinson moved on Wilson ensured that Sackville-West took the post. Illustrating the trust between them, Wilson consulted Sackville-West on the controversial subject of a suitable new title for Foch once he was in overall command of Allied forces in France. Wilson also sought assurance on the American PMR General Tasker H. Bliss's position on the future

[39] Sackville-West obituary, *The Times*, 9 May 1962.
[40] Another loyal ally from this period, also a Staff College instructor, was Major-General Sir George 'Uncle' Harper.
[41] Callwell, *Wilson*, (vol. I) pp. 68 and 93.
[42] Wilson diary, 3 November 1917.
[43] IWM, Wilson papers, Sackville-West to Wilson, (HHW 2/12B/4), 5 March 1918, and Wilson diary, 24 March 1918; 'appanage' or 'apanage', originally a French word meaning 'A dependent territory or property; a dependency', *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, (2 vols.), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986 [1983]), vol. I, p. 85.
[44] Sheffield, *Command and Morale*, pp. 45-7; idem, *The Chief*, pp. 110 and 168.

deployment of US forces.[45] Another loyalist Wilson had to fight the War Office to secure for Versailles was his ADC, Viscount Duncannon, an MP and one of the founders of the right-wing, pro-conscription National Party.[46] Wilson knew Duncannon as 'the Lord' and discussed a possible future in parliament with him in the summer of 1917.[47]

Wilson's fondness for mixing military life with the political found him another admirer in the shape of Leopold Amery, another Unionist MP and an influential figure in the British war effort. Amery and Wilson became acquainted during the Boer War. When the former was commissioned to write *The Times* history of the conflict he cited Wilson as a particularly valuable source.[48] They met frequently during the Great War. In 1916 Amery hosted regular parties at his home when guests included Milner, the Ulster Unionist leader Sir Edward Carson, Geoffrey Robinson (later Dawson), editor of *The Times*, Lord Astor (proprietor of the *Observer*), and the writer and Unionist politician F.S. 'Fred' Oliver. Lloyd George, his Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS) Philip Kerr, and Wilson when on leave from his duties as IV Corps commander, 'occasionally joined our discussions'.[49] In early 1917 Amery was one of two political secretaries appointed to Lloyd George's new War Cabinet where 'we were to be at the

[45] Wilson diary, 9, 10 April 1918.
[46] Hon. Captain Vere Brabazon, later Earl of Bessborough (1880-1956); for a discussion of the short-lived National Party see William D. Rubinstein, 'Henry Page Croft and the National Party 1917-22, *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 9 (1), (1974), pp. 129–148, and Keith M. Wilson, 'National Party Spirits: Backing into the Future', in Hughes and Seligmann, *Leadership*, pp. 209-226.
[47] Wilson, 'National Party', in Hughes and Seligmann (eds.), *Leadership*, p. 217.
[48] Badsey, *Doctrine*, p. 148.
[49] L.S. Amery, *My Political Life, Volume Two: War & Peace, 1914-1929* (London: Hutchinson, 1953), p. 81.

disposal of its members and at the same time free, as a kind of informal "brains trust", to submit our ideas on all subjects for our chiefs.'[50] In the summer, when effectively out of work, Wilson, in Amery's opinion 'much the most active brain in the Army…' had 'nothing to do except think and talk, both gifts in which he excelled.' It meant that, once ensconced as head of Eastern Command:

> For the first time in the war he was in a position to see it from a wider perspective than that of the Western Front and, for the first time, headquarters in London gave him the opportunity for continuous intercourse with Lloyd George, Milner and the rest of the War Cabinet, as well as with an old confederate like myself.'[51]

In late 1917, when Wilson was setting up his military secretariat at Versailles, Amery joined him as political secretary to the British section. Amery continued to report to Hankey but, never one to downplay his own role, considered himself to be the 'personal representative of Lloyd George and Milner, and liaison officer with the War Cabinet…'[52] Despite Cabinet support, the appointment was held up temporarily by Robertson and Derby.[53] Amery played an important role at the SWC and authored several detailed, and often wordy, strategy reports, especially on Britain's post-war imperial future. These reflected not only his own views, but also those of Wilson, and of Milner whom he saw regularly. This trio did much to lay the foundations of British strategic policy in 1918. Milner was a strong voice in the War Cabinet. His authority was underpinned by

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[50] Amery, *Political Life*, p. 91; the other Political Secretary was Colonel Sir Mark Sykes, Conservative MP and author of the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement in which the Allies agreed to the post-war partition of the Ottoman Empire, see Lawrence James, *Dictionary of National Biography* (online edition), http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36393?docPos=1, accessed 16 January 2017.
[51] Amery, *Political Life*, pp. 124-5.
[52] Ibid., p. 129.
[53] Wilson diary, 19, 26 November 1917.

Amery's intellectual diligence. Wilson provided eloquence, and a military vision more to Lloyd George's taste than that of Haig and Robertson. Amery was a linguist and scholar whose papers provided the intellectual heft for Wilson's strategic arguments. Wilson was alive to Amery's failings and once noted: 'He is much too academic and much more in the mood of arranging what would happen after the war than arranging how to win the war. All this displeases me.'[54] Amery was, nonetheless, a useful and influential ally. Wilson gave him a preview of the paper that made the case for the establishment of what became the SWC and Amery thought it 'unanswerable'. During the following week, Wilson lobbied Milner, Carson and Derby who were all allegedly prevaricating because of Robertson's likely opposition.[55] On 30 October he saw Amery again, recruited his support and:

> …pushed into him the absolute necessity of a Superior Direction which if properly handled would give us a dominating influence in all plans. He came to see me before dinner to tell me he had seen Milner and he thought Milner was now convinced of the necessity.[56]

As discussed in the next chapter, Wilson's cajoling of Amery and lobbying of Milner paid off. Once at Versailles, Wilson assembled other loyalists to his operations team. This was common practice. When Robertson was promoted to the post of CIGS in late 1915 he took with him from France Edward M. Perceval as his CoS. Perceval soon moved to command a division and Wully replaced him with Robert Whigham. Both had been instructors under Robertson at the Staff College. Another Camberley

[54] Wilson diary, 6 July 1917.
[55] Ibid., 24, 26, 28 October 1917.
[56] Ibid., 30 October 1917 (original emphasis).

colleague, Frederick 'Freddie' Maurice, moved from GHQ to the War Office as Robertson's DMO. The new CIGS also ensured that 'most of the junior officers' in his various departments had trained under him at the Staff College and were both 'capable and loyal' to their chief.[57] In 1914, when Wilson was appointed the BEF's Sub-Chief of Staff, 'almost the entire operations section consisted of his former subordinates at the War Office'.[58] Three years later at Versailles Wilson established three teams, under Sackville-West as CoS. They were tasked with viewing strategy from the following perspectives: Allied or 'A' Branch, Enemy or 'E' Branch and Man-Power and Munitions (Allied and Enemy) or 'M' Branch.[59] Wilson picked the officers who headed each branch.[60] Brigadier-Generals Herbert 'Bertie' Studd and Sir Hereward Wake headed, respectively, 'A' and 'E' Branches, and Frederick 'Freddie' Sykes headed 'M' Branch.[61] Studd had been a student of Rawlinson at the Staff College and served at the War Office while Wilson was DMO.[62] Wake was at the Staff College under Wilson as commandant, graduating in 1908.[63] They served together in South Africa, and as a staff officer at GHQ in 1914 Wake joined Wilson at 'Bob's' deathbed.[64] Sykes was another Staff College graduate of Wilson's.

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[57] Field Marshal Sir William Robertson, *From Private to Field-Marshal* (London: Constable, 1921), pp. 221-2.
[58] Nikolas Gardner, 'Command in Crisis: The British Expeditionary Force and the Forest of Mormal, August 1914', *War & Society*, vol. 16 (2), (October 1998), p. 17.
[59] TNA CAB 25/127, 'Historical record of the Supreme War Council of the Allied and Associated Nations from its inception on November 7, 1917, to November 12, 1918, the day after the signature of the Armistice with Germany, together with a note as to its role and work subsequent to that date,' (hereafter SWC History), undated, but believed to have been compiled in late 1919.
[60] See p 143.
[61] Wilson diary, 3 November 1917; SWC History.
[62] Paul Harris, *The Men Who Planned the War: A Study of the Staff of the British Army on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016), Appendix 12, pp. 223-246; I am grateful to Dr Harris for additional information on this point.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Wilson diary, 14 November 1914.

He served at the War Office while Wilson was DMO, where he 'made some valuable contacts,' working with George Macdonogh, the future Director of Military Intelligence (DMI) at the War Office, and later Adjutant-General (AG). Sykes was one of the leading proponents of air power before and during the war. Wilson 'supported Sykes' flying ambitions, but he was more interested in his abilities and value as an intelligence officer'.[65] Two months after Wilson became CIGS, Sykes was promoted to Major-General and appointed Chief of the Air Staff.[66] Wilson and Sykes continued to work closely, in an effort to improve co-operation between Army and Air Force. Wilson recruited other Staff College graduates from his time at Camberley, notably Lieutenant-Colonels R. Riley (graduated 1907), Alfred Ollivant (1908), and Archibald Wavell (1910).[67] Another beneficiary of Wilson's promotion was Sir Percy Radcliffe. He had served in Wilson's pre-War Operations directorate and succeeded Freddie Maurice as DMO in April 1918.[68]

Absent from Wilson's pre-war circle of friends was Haig, but absence of friendship should not be taken as evidence of discord. Haig was not known for his social skills and was unlikely to have been comfortable with Wilson's irreverent and often flippant style.[69] Launcelot Kiggell, a close friend of Haig's and his CoS with the BEF, believed Haig 'had a good deal

[65] Eric Ash, *Sir Frederick Sykes and the Air Revolution – 1912-1918* (London: Frank Cass, 1999), p. 22; see also Sir Frederick Sykes, *From Many Angles: An Autobiography* (London: Harrap, 1943 [1942]).
[66] Robert Blake in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (online edition), http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36393?docPos=1, accessed 6 January 2017.
[67] SWC History.
[68] Maurice, *Maurice Case*, p. 19.
[69] Sheffield, *The Chief*, pp. 12-13, 66.

to do' with Wilson receiving his CB [Commander of the Order of the Bath] in 1908.[70] The evidence suggests they got on well enough in the pre-war period, to the point of secretly conspiring on military strategy.[71] When Haig was CoS India he wrote to Wilson seeking the DMO's views on the strategy of both Germany and the Ottoman Empire.[72] He also recruited Wilson's input and support for his abortive plans for the mobilisation of the Indian Army to Europe in the event of war.[73] It is hard to believe Haig would have shared such sensitive information with a man who, according to Haig's early biographer Alfred Duff Cooper, 'produced no impression but distrust in the mind of the cautious Scotsman.'[74] With his characteristic ability to spot a poison chalice, Haig declined to take sides overtly in the toxic Curragh affair which so undermined Wilson's credibility with Asquith; thus he avoided alienating either side.[75] They had very different roles once war broke out. Haig's combat commands were never threatened directly by Wilson's liaison work. Nonetheless, according to Charteris, in 1914 Haig believed Wilson to be 'a politician, and not a soldier, and "politician" with Douglas Haig is synonymous with crooked dealing and wrong sense of values.'[76] Haig's prominent role in the removal of French in 1915, and his abandonment of Robertson in early 1918 when both were fighting for their professional lives, illustrates how willing, and adept, he was at high

[70] Wilson papers, Kiggell to Wilson (2/69/35), 27 June 1908.
[71] Jeffery, *MCHW*, p. 21.
[72] Wilson papers, Haig to Wilson, (2/70/3) 16 March, (2/70/4) 19 April, (2/70/6) 29 June, (2/70/7) 2 August 1911.
[73] Ibid., (2/70/17) 7 September, (2/70/19) 9 November and (2/70/18) Hamilton Gordon to Wilson, 6 November 1911.
[74] Alfred Duff Cooper, *Haig* (2 vols.), (London: Faber & Faber, 1935-6), (vol. I), p. 143.
[75] Ian F.W. Beckett, *The Army and the Curragh Incident 1914* (London: Bodley Head for the Army Records Society, 1985), pp. 6-11; Sheffield, *The Chief*, pp. 62-65.
[76] Charteris, *At GHQ*, p. 11.

level 'politics'.[77] In the summer of 1918 Haig told Wilson 'he had never had such a free hand, never been so little worried & therefore never been so happy as under me.'[78] Rawlinson later reported that Haig had told him 'how much easier he found it with you [Wilson] as CIGS instead of Wullie [sic].'[79] One of Haig's aristocratic friends claimed that he had considered Wilson 'an enemy' yet on the day of his assassination he had appeared in her rooms in full Field Marshal's uniform with 'tears rolling down his face.'[80] It is safe to conclude that the relationship was, at the very least, nuanced.

Jeffery argued convincingly that once French fell, neither Haig nor Robertson were minded to give Wilson a prominent role in the Army hierarchy.[81] As a result, he ended up in command of IV Corps, part of First Army, for much of 1916 in a relatively 'quiet' sector around Arras.[82] He found himself in the new C-in-C's sights in May when his forces lost and failed to retake a stretch of trench in a minor German attack.[83] Haig demanded an inquiry and noted that IV Corps had 'much decreased in military value' since Wilson took over and added later in the typescript

[77] Sheffield, *The Chief*, pp. 131, 264.
[78] Wilson diary, 21 July 1918.
[79] Wilson papers, (2/13A/26), Rawlinson to Wilson, 19 August 1918.
[80] Elizabeth Burke Plunkett, Lady Fingall, *Seventy Years Young: Memories of Elizabeth Countess of Fingall* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1991 [1937]), p. 173.
[81] Jeffery, *Wilson*, pp. 152-154.
[82] Wilson took over the Corps command on 22 December 1915; see Ian F.W. Beckett and Stephen J. Corvi (eds.), *Haig's Generals* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2009 [2006]), Appendix, p. 210.
[83] Wilson diary, 20-25 May 1916; for a detailed description of this action and its aftermath see Edmonds, *OH: France and Belgium 1916,* vol. I, pp. 210-226.

version of his diary that he had 'failed as a commander in the field.'[84] It is unclear whether or not Haig ever really intended 'degumming' Wilson, but the latter heard later that he had only been saved by support from his Army commander General Charles Monro.[85] Nonetheless, there were repercussions. When Monro became C-in-C India he was succeeded by Major-General Richard Haking, Wilson's junior. Wilson believed he should have inherited the command 'but of course Haig would not have [it]. And how pleased Robertson will be.'[86] Despite this disappointment, all indications are that when Wilson became CIGS he and Haig enjoyed an amicable relationship. In the wake of the 1918 German Spring Offensive Wilson, by then CIGS, finally resolved, with apparently great reluctance, to recommend Haig's replacement. Even then, neither man's diary indicates any personal animosity.[87]

Wilson had a different relationship with Robertson, the man he would eventually replace as CIGS. Robertson succeeded Wilson as commandant at the Staff College in 1910. According to Sir James Edmonds, Wilson embarrassed Robertson, a poor man by army officer standards, by demanding that he pay for some items of furniture he had left in the commandant's quarters. The details of the story are unclear, but 'the two men were never close thereafter'.[88] When it became clear at the

[84] Haig diary, 27 May 1916, in Gary Sheffield and John Bourne (eds.), *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918* (London: Phoenix, 2006 [2005]), pp. 188-9; the clearest account of these events appears in Jeffery, *Wilson*, pp. 162-167.
[85] Wilson diary, 13 August 1916.
[86] Wilson diary, 6 August 1916, in Jeffery, *Wilson*, p. 178; Haking took temporary command of First Army on 7 August and was succeeded by Horne on 29 September 1916.
[87] See p. 245.
[88] Jeffery, *Wilson*, p. 79; for variations on the nature of this disagreement, see also

end of 1914 that Murray was not up to the demands of the role of French's CoS, Wilson hoped his time had come.[89] This time there is no doubt that Asquith vetoed his appointment, which went instead to Robertson.[90] Wilson recorded that he and Robertson discussed which of them might get Murray's job but neither felt they would be able to work with Sir John 'the chance of a lifetime & two men in a car both refusing it.'[91] Robertson finally took the post and brought administrative order where Murray had presided over chaos, impressing French and visitors alike with his administrative efficiency.[92] Importantly for their future relationship Wilson had to make do with the much less prestigious job of the BEF's principal liaison officer with the French Army. He clearly felt cheated by Asquith. As a consolation prize, he was promoted to (temporary) Lieutenant-General and wrote, somewhat self-deludingly, that the new role made him 'much bigger and more powerful than before'.[93] At the same time, Robertson was aware that he had not been French's first choice.[94] Despite his professional efficiency Robertson's dour and blunt character was not to the Field Marshal's taste and before long Wilson was dining regularly in French's mess while Robertson did so elsewhere with his own team. Robertson made light of this in his memoirs, but it can have done little for his future relationship

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Strachan, *Politics*, p. 136; David R. Woodward, *The Military Correspondence of Field-Marshal Sir William Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, December 1915-February 1918* (London: Army Records Society, 1989), (hereafter *MCWR*), p. 346; Bond, *Victorian Army*, pp. 268-9.

[89] J.M. Bourne, *Britain and the Great War 1914-1918* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), p. 27.

[90] Wilson diary, 9 January 1915.

[91] Ibid., 17 January 1915.

[92] Churchill Archives Centre (hereafter CAC), Hankey Papers, (HNKY 4/7), Esher to Hankey, ? March 1915 (precise date obscured by hole punch in original notepaper).

[93] Wilson diary, 31 December 1915.

[94] Robertson, *Private to Field-Marshal*, p. 218.

with Wilson.[95] Robertson's elevation to the role of the government's principal military adviser at the War Office in December was another disappointment to Wilson. He described 1915 as 'an unkind year' which began with him being denied the CoS post and ending 'with Robertson getting CIGS, which at one time it looked as though I was certain to get, either when Murray got it, or, later, before Robertson got it.'[96] Instead he ended up with a much less prestigious post in command of IV Corps.

One of Robertson's staunchest, and most influential, supporters while CIGS was a former Rifle Brigade officer and erstwhile friend of Wilson's, Charles à Court Repington. During the war he wielded great power and influence as war correspondent of *The Times* and then in 1918 of the right-wing *Morning Post*. Unfortunately for Wilson, he and Repington had quarrelled in 1901 over a divorce case and the latter was forced to resign.[97] Repington 'attached the blame for his dismissal entirely upon Henry Wilson thereby managing altogether to exculpate himself.'[98] He made Wilson's life difficult during the creation of the SWC and thereafter.[99] Repington was strongly in the Haig-Robertson camp and opposed Lloyd George's efforts to wrest control of strategy on the Western Front away

[95] Robertson, *Private to Field-Marshal*, p. 222; Charteris, *GHQ*, p. 87.
[96] Wilson diary, 31 December 1915; Sir Archibald Murray was CIGS from 25 September until 23 December 1915.
[97] For a résumé of the Repington-Wilson quarrel see A.J.A. Morris, *Reporting the First World War: Charles Repington, The Times and the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 4-6; also, idem, (ed.), *The Letters of Lieutenant-Colonel Charles à Court Repington CMG: Military Correspondent of The Times, 1903-1918* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing for the Army Records Society, 1999), pp. 7-10, and Jeffery, *Wilson*, pp. 48-53.
[98] Morris, *Letters*, p. 10.
[99] Lieutenant-Colonel C. à Court Repington, *The First World War, 1914-1918* (2 vols.) (London: Constable, 1920), (vol. II), p. 132.

from the War Office and GHQ. Another Wilson adversary was Sir Hubert Gough, who played a leading role in the Curragh Incident. Hubert, and particularly his brother Johnnie, had been on good terms with Wilson before this affair. For example Johnnie, another former Rifle Brigade officer, Rawlinson and Wilson played golf together on Boxing Day 1913.[100] After the Curragh the Goughs' relationship with Wilson was strained, with Johnnie apparently never speaking to Wilson again.[101] In his bitter memoir *Soldiering On* Hubert Gough accused Wilson of encouraging the revolt 'to refuse any concessions by Mr Asquith's Government, while he never emerged from the background.'[102] Gough never forgave Wilson and in March 1917 did his best to scupper his chances of being appointed chief liaison officer at the French C-in-C General Robert Nivelle's headquarters. In a letter to Sir Clive Wigram, King George V's private secretary, he branded Wilson a 'thorough intriguer' and 'danger' to the British Army should he be given any power.[103] Wilson was ultimately responsible for ordering Gough's dismissal after the disaster of the German Spring Offensive in 1918, although, as is discussed later, the War Cabinet and Lloyd George in particular were looking for a scapegoat. Almost four decades later, Gough's animosity was unabated. He devoted a short chapter in his memoir to Wilson who, he wrote, 'exercised a considerable and somewhat baleful influence on the conduct of the First World War. This was due to his own lack of sound strategical sense and his blind

[100] Wilson diary, 26 December 1913.
[101] Farrar-Hockley, *Goughie*, p. 102
[102] General Sir Hubert Gough, *Soldiering On* (London: Arthur Barker Ltd, 1954) p. 172; Farrar-Hockley, *Goughie*, p. 106.
[103] Gough to Wigram, 3 March 1917, in Jeffery, *Wilson*, pp. 188-9.

devotion to everything French, coupled with the glib and easy way with which he talked.'[104]

A particularly notable absentee from the Wilson supporters' club was King George V. He cultivated the opinions of leading soldiers throughout the war, including Haig, whose wife Dorothy had been Maid of Honour to the King's mother, Queen Alexandra.[105] Badsey has noted that these connections reflected a long-held view amongst 'most regimental officers' in the British Army that they 'saw their loyalty as being to the sovereign rather than the government'.[106] Robertson, French, Horace Smith-Dorrien, Hubert Gough and others kept the King informed of their activities and views. Interestingly, Wilson was not in this charmed circle and his interactions with his sovereign were limited to formal occasions even once he became CIGS.[107]

POLITICAL

The course of the events discussed above is important in understanding Wilson's attitude, both to his fellow officers and, more importantly, politicians. Aware that Asquith was responsible for his failure to progress, Wilson courted those politicians whose views on how the war ought to be fought, and on other key issues such as conscription and Irish Home Rule, coincided with his own. These included strongly pro-Unionist Tories such

[104] Gough, *Soldiering On*, p. 171.
[105] Sheffield, *The Chief*, pp. 57, 153-4.
[106] Badsey, *Doctrine*, p. 50.
[107] Ian F.W. Beckett, 'King George V and his Generals', in Hughes and Seligmann, *Leadership*, pp. 247-264.

as Lords Curzon and Milner, together with Liberal Winston Churchill and - fundamentally for his future career - Lloyd George. Although like Asquith a Liberal, Lloyd George struck Wilson as a much stronger potential war leader than the apparently blasé 'wait and see' Prime Minister.[108] Wilson and Lloyd George, who became Secretary of State for War on 6 June 1916, saw each other from time to time during that year.[109] Of particular note was Wilson's assertion that while Britain would win the war he agreed with Lloyd George that more help ought to be given to Russia. In order to do this, he suggested, Haig ought to be 'told exactly how many men he was going to be given & when, & then he could calculate how many fronts he could attack on...Lloyd George was clearly dissatisfied with Haig and also with Robertson, but did not, of course, discuss either of them directly.'[110] Wilson's apparent willingness to restrict the freedom of British action in the west in order to help an ally prosecute the war elsewhere would resonate in the Wilson-Lloyd George relationship for the rest of the conflict. As for the Welshman's antipathy towards Haig and Robertson, this soon became more overt.

Wilson was a dyed-in-the wool Unionist who cultivated like-minded politicians. Chief among them was Bonar Law, and Churchill, although a Liberal, was a life-long supporter and regarded Wilson as 'an officer of

[108] Wilson to Amery, 17 September 1915, in John Barnes and David Nicholson, (eds.), *The Leo Amery Diaries, vol. 1., 1896-1929* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), p. 124; for Asquith's style of government, see George H. Cassar, *Asquith as War Leader* (London: Hambledon Press, 1994), pp. 31-34, and Roy Jenkins, *Asquith* (London: Collins, 1964), pp. 350-352.
[109] Wilson diary 28 January, 13 August 1916.
[110] Ibid., 13 November 1916.

extraordinary vision and faith' even though, ironically enough, from time to time Wilson despaired of his friend's capriciousness.[111] Wilson was an established acquaintance of Lloyd George by the time the latter entered 10 Downing Street on 6 December 1916. Lloyd George's coalition administration was in fact 'a thoroughly Tory beast with an attenuated Liberal tail'.[112] Senior Unionists such as Bonar Law, Curzon and Milner wielded significant influence in the new government. The new Prime Minister needed allies, in both political and military circles.[113] In the latter he found slim pickings, thanks in part to 'a psychological gulf between civilian and service leaders'.[114] Wilson was one of the few senior British officers who in autumn 1917 was seemingly able and willing to help bridge the gap. Lloyd George's plan to subordinate his country's military strategy to the French, a cack-handed attempt at limiting British casualties, had backfired with catastrophic results for civil-military relations. Consequently, senior military figures distrusted him and 'the ultimate result of the prime minister's effort to reduce the army's leverage was to enhance it.'[115]

Following the Nivelle debacle, Haig was in a stronger position than ever, with his Conservative supporters ready to back him in a trial of strength with the Prime Minister. In Whitehall, the War Office was dominated by Robertson and his team. Lloyd George judged that instead of getting

[111] Winston S. Churchill, *World Crisis* (single volume edition) (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1931), p. 49.
[112] R.J.Q. Adams and Philip P. Poirier, *The Conscription Controversy in Britain, 1900-1918* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), p. 196.
[113] Woodward, *Lloyd George*, pp. 133-137.
[114] Grigg, *Lloyd George*, p. 3.
[114] Strachan, *Politics*, p. 135.
[115] Ibid.

independent counsel from the government's principal military adviser he received little more than Haig's position from the uncritical Robertson. Wully avoided any suggestion of disagreement between himself and the C-in-C when interacting with politicians, but he was far from the Haig lackey Lloyd George believed him to be.[116] As a result, the Prime Minister sought alternative military pundits. For once Wilson was in the right place at the right time: 'In party political terms, his loyalties were very different from Lloyd George's, but so too were those of most of the Prime Minister's cabinet colleagues, and Lloyd George may have felt that Wilson's political credentials could buttress his position with the Conservatives on whom he depended.'[117] Unlike the tongue-tied Haig, Wilson was loquacious, irreverent and in some ways similar in character to Lloyd George. Both men wore their hearts on their sleeves, both had the 'gift of the gab', both reveled in the company of like-minded, apparently clever men. Lloyd George's ally, the newspaper proprietor Sir George (later Lord) Riddell noted that temperamentally 'Wilson was much better fitted than Robertson to get on with L[loyd] G[eorge]. W[ilson] had the happy knack, which suited LG, of interspersing serious business with jokes and badinage.'[118] Unlike the dour and abrupt Robertson, Wilson listened, seemingly in thrall, to politicians - particularly those with power - and appeared as if he agreed with their every word. He 'was endued with the political mind, and could and did talk the language of the politicians.'[119] Unlike Robertson, whose

[116] Woodward, *Robertson*, pp. 176-8.
[117] Strachan, *Politics*, p. 137.
[118] Lord Riddell, diary 16 February 1918, in *Lord Riddell's War Diary 1914-1918* (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1933), p. 312.
[119] Beaverbrook, *Politicians*, p. 192.

contemptuous dismissals of what he saw as political interference in military strategy infuriated the Prime Minister, Wilson reserved his abuse of the 'frocks' for his diary and letters to trusted friends.

Lloyd George had long been an admirer of Wilson's.[120] As Prime Minister he knew where to turn for alternative military advice. Even then, it was almost a year before Wilson attained real authority. For the first months of the new premiership Wilson was senior British liaison officer at *GQG*. Wilson and Nivelle got on well, despite some misgivings in the War Office. Nivelle's April offensive failed to achieve its objectives and he was replaced by General Philippe Pétain.[121] Pétain distrusted Wilson, considering him too close to Nivelle, and had him sent home.[122] Wilson was put on half-pay, during which time he threatened to get into 'mischief' if he failed to find appropriate employment.[123] He spent the summer considering a parliamentary career but generated little enthusiasm, either personally or amongst his political friends.[124] Wilson was appointed to head the Eastern [Home] Command on 1 September 1917, something of a sinecure according to his diary, which recorded desultory duties over the following weeks.

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[120] Jeffery, *Wilson*, p. 177.
[121] For a recent assessment of the Nivelle Offensive, which began on 16 April 1917, see Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *The French Army and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 170-219.
[122] Wilson diary, 31 May 1917; see also Max Egremont, *Under Two Flags: The Life of Major-General Sir Edward Spears* (London: Phoenix, 1998 [1997]), p. 55.
[123] Millman, 'Wilson's Mischief', pp. 467-486
[124] Jeffery, *Wilson*, pp. 196-8.

Wilson's chance came in October when, with Third Ypres dragging on, he was called in to critique Haig's and Robertson's proposals for Allied strategy for 1918. Unsurprisingly he took the opportunity to make some suggestions of his own. This was a crucial point in Wilson's career, but the patronage of Lloyd George alone was unlikely to have been sufficient to propel him to the highest position in the British Army. Years of assiduous cultivation of political allies finally began to pay off. Most important of these was the support of Milner, whom Wilson had got to know when he became DMO at the War Office.[125] Both strong Unionists, they saw eye to eye more often than either did with the Prime Minister. One area of agreement was a determination that Britain's imperial ambitions would emerge from the war not only intact, but enhanced. Lloyd George took a more nuanced approach to this point; he had no intention of seeing the British Empire founder but his wartime predilection for 'sideshows' was more concerned with victory over Germany by dint of defeat of her friends than further expansion of the 'Pax Britannica'.[126]

Milner was one of the Prime Minister's most important supporters and a member, without portfolio, first of the War Cabinet, established on Lloyd George's accession to the premiership, and the smaller War Policy Committee set up to advise on future strategy in June 1917.[127] In Milner, Wilson had a 'friend and mentor' at the heart of government.[128] They

[125] Wilson diary, 17 and 21 June 1911.
[126] Grigg, *Lloyd George*, p. 345.
[127] The War Policy Committee first met on 11 June 1917, and consisted of Lloyd George, Curzon, Milner, and the South African, General Jan Smuts, with Hankey as secretary, French, *Lloyd George Coalition*, p. 101.
[128] Adams and Poirier, *Conscription Controversy*, p. 219.

participated in the Allied delegation to Russia in early 1917, with Wilson as senior British military representative, and Milner supported his proposals for the SWC. They met four times while Wilson was writing his report for the War Cabinet in October and it is unlikely that the scheme could have succeeded without Milner's backing.[129] In addition, Milner and Amery were confidants, the younger man regarded Milner as 'my leader, as well as my best friend'.[130]

Another politician who Wilson considered a friend, if a critical one, was Bonar Law. As Chancellor of the Exchequer, Bonar Law was a permanent member of the War Cabinet and supported Wilson as CIGS. They met in 1912 when Wilson was DMO and Bonar Law Leader of the Opposition; they associated regularly thereafter.[131] In late 1915 Wilson was convinced that Asquith and his coalition government was not up to winning the war, in part because of Asquith's reluctance to enact full military conscription. Bonar Law's support was fundamental to Asquith remaining in power, but according to Wilson: 'It is impossible to conduct successful war if you base yourself on INDECISION. You can get nothing but indecision out of the PM *Quod est.*'[132] Bonar Law had, as discussed in the next chapter, supported Wilson's suggestion to put Anglo-French liaison on a more formal footing by creating a 'committee of six' political and military representatives. Nonetheless, he had little truck with his friend's desire to

[129] Bodleian Library Oxford (hereafter BLO), Milner diary, 11, 12, 18, 19 October 1917; Wilson diary, 18, 19 October 1917.
[130] Amery, *Political Life*, p. 91.
[131] Wilson diary, 27 June 1912.
[132] Parliamentary Archives (hereafter PA), Bonar Law papers, 52/1/65, Wilson to Bonar Law, 29 December 1915.

remove the Prime Minister. Wilson had barely arrived on the Western Front before he was urging Bonar Law to 'get rid of Squiff'.[133] In March he denounced the 'ramshackle of a coalition' running the country, condemning Asquith as a man 'who has never gone to war, who has no intention, even now, of going to war, & who has no intention either of allowing anyone else to go to war.' He urged Bonar Law to withdraw his party from the coalition:

> You owe Squiff no loyalty, absolutely none. You saved him once when you joined him & a bad day's work it was – whereas you owe the whole of your loyalty to our country & you know as well as I do how shamefully, how disastrously Squiff has tried to govern us.[134]

Wilson, the so-called 'political soldier' still had much to learn in his dealings with the professionals, and telling them their job was something to avoid. Seemingly irritated by the back-handed compliment about loyalty, Bonar Law put Wilson in his place. Things were not as simple as Wilson suggested. His arguments 'would do for an article in the *Daily Mail*', but were unrealistic. If the Unionists broke up the government there would have to be a General Election, no party would achieve a majority, social and political unrest could result and 'martial law' might be necessary. Bonar Law believed that instead of unity the nation would be 'bitterly divided'. His view was that:

> With all its disadvantages the best chance of winning the war is by a Government such as the present; and of course as long as I hold that view I shall not do anything to change it. Do not suppose that I don't fully realise that the other what I may call the ruthless-method may not be the best; but that must be a matter of opinion, and my judgement is against it.[135]

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[133] PA, Bonar Law papers, 52/3/1, Wilson to Bonar Law, 1 February 1916.
[134] Ibid., 52/4/29, Wilson to Bonar Law, 24 March 1916.
[135] Ibid., 53/6/68, Bonar Law to Wilson, 31 March 1916.

Wilson learned his lesson. Over the next 18 months his manner in dealing with the ruthlessly resolute Lloyd George was much more deferential, less hectoring.

THE FRENCH

Wilson's ability to develop and sustain alliances with British politicians was echoed in his relationships with members of the political-military establishment in France.[136] Britain and France had been entente partners since 1904, but few British officers had fostered close ties with colleagues across the Channel. Wilson was one who had. His work with Foch and others to plan Britain's role should Germany attack France had nurtured a climate of trust which was of great importance during the war.[137] Wilson's ability to keep the Anglo-French entente alive at times of great stress was his most significant contribution to Allied victory in 1918. Wilson's francophilia was well known both before and during the war, and appears prominently in the historiography of his career. He visited France often in the pre-war period, reconnoitring the frontiers of France, Germany and Belgium where battles might be fought should Germany invade.[138] Thanks to a French governess, Wilson spoke the language well, although there are varying assessments as to his fluency. Edward Spears, who undertook several Anglo-French liaison roles during the war and did speak French

[136] Huguet, *Britain and the War*, pp. 19-23; Gooch, *Plans of War*, pp. 119-124.
[137] Williamson, *Grand Strategy*, pp. 89, 141, 223.
Jeffery, *Wilson*, pp. 85-87.
[138] Wilson visited the French and Belgian frontiers in October 1911 and in early 1912: Wilson diary, 4-24 October 1911 and 27 February-3 March 1912.

fluently, wrote that in 1914 Wilson 'did not speak French as well during this stage of the war as he did later.'[139] Peter Wright, who worked as an interpreter in the British Military Secretariat at the SWC and another of Wilson's Staff College graduates noted:

> Though not good at French, he understood something far more difficult than their language, the free, violent, rhetorical modes of speech used by Latins, always baffling, usually shocking, and sometimes exasperating to grave contained, romantic northerners.[140]

Whatever the precise level of Wilson's fluency, he was more accomplished than most of his peers. When war broke out, Wilson knew the French Army well, the Franco-German frontier intimately, and had forged a number of alliances with military and political figures. Most important for the course of Anglo-French relations were his friendship with Foch, and his acquaintanceship - it would be misinterpreting the relationship to describe them as 'friends' - with the politician Georges Clemenceau.

Wilson's friendship with Foch began in 1909 when Wilson was Commandant of the Staff College and he visited his opposite number at the *Ecole Supérieure de Guerre.* They agreed on the threat Germany posed to peace in Europe.[141] The pair got on so well that Wilson attended the wedding of Foch's daughter in 1910.[142] Between December 1909 and

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[139] Spears, *Liaison*, *n*. p. 298.
[140] Captain Peter E. Wright, *At the Supreme War Council* (New York & London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, The Knickerbocker Press, American Edition, 1921), pp. 41-2; Wright graduated in 1908.
[141] Wilson diary, 2, 3 December 1909; Wilson was appointed Commandant of the Staff College at the end of 1906, Jeffery, *Wilson*, pp. 64-6.
[142] Ibid., 12 October 1910.

May 1914, they met at least 11 times. When war came this familiarity meant 'they were able to communicate honestly with each other'.[143] Such frankness stood them in good stead throughout the conflict.[144] In 1915 the relationship was put under considerable stress. With Wilson in his liaison role and Foch in command of the French Northern Army Group fighting beside the BEF, they co-operated to smooth over tensions between their respective C-in-Cs, French and Joffre.[145] The French military authorities trusted Wilson. Soon after taking up the liaison post he was permitted a tour along whole of their line from Amiens to the Swiss border: 'No other officer in any army, not even a Russian, has been allowed to go down the French line except me.'[146] As Callwell noted:

> Wilson was so essentially a persona grata at French GQG and amongst French superior commanders in general, that he possessed altogether exceptional qualifications for filling the post of principal liaison officer between Sir John's headquarters and Chantilly [Joffre's HQ]. That, in view of the relations existing between the leaders and the General Staffs of the two allied hosts, such liaison work needed to be in skilled and tactful hands had been plainly demonstrated during the previous months…[147]

This ability to pour oil on the troubled waters which often existed between the Allies should not be underestimated. French's relations with Joffre and his staff were notoriously poor. There were many occasions during 1915 when Wilson, often in concert with Foch, smoothed out the peaks and troughs in his chief's mercurial approach, to the benefit of both allies. This contribution was not - as some of Wilson's colleagues often suggested -

[143] Greenhalgh, *Foch*, pp.10, 81.
[144] Huguet, *Britain and the War,* p. 129.
[145] Sheffield and Spencer, 'Soldiers in Strife', pp. 83-99.
[146] Wilson to Lady Wilson, 21 January 1915, quoted in Callwell, *Wilson* (vol. I), p. 203.
[147] Ibid., (vol. I), p. 204.

an uncritical allegiance to the French position. Wilson regularly clashed with his Gallic colleagues, most often, and with the greatest passion, with Foch and Clemenceau.[148] Instead, Wilson had the ability to see issues from the French perspective and then strive to harmonise what sometimes appeared to be irreconcilable differences. His long-standing relationship with Sir John helped in this regard. Familiarity with French colleagues allowed both sides to adopt a frankness which between other less well-acquainted individuals might have done irreparable damage. It should be stressed that Wilson never favoured the French position at the expense of the British. There is no evidence for Gough's assertion that Wilson had a 'blind devotion to everything French'.[149] He was, nonetheless, able to oil the wheels of communication at times of greatest inter-Allied friction. This was particularly true during his tenure at the SWC and then as CIGS when his loyalties were put to the test regularly. In his memoirs Foch paid testament to this diplomatic balancing act, noting his 'old friend's… patriotic vigilance and far-sighted intelligence'.[150]

The strength of the Wilson-Foch alliance is illustrated by the fact that in 1916, while the former was commanding IV Corps, they still saw each other often. Wilson promoted his friend's career in the summer when Clemenceau, then French War Minister, suggested Joffre might have to be removed. Clemenceau suggested that the choice was between Foch, General de Cuières de Castelnau, and Pétain. Clemenceau apparently

[148] See Chapter Five 'Unity of Command'.
[149] Gough, *Soldiering On*, p. 171.
[150] Colonel T. Bentley Mott (trans.), *The Memoirs of Marshal Foch* (London: Heinemann, 1931), p. 141.

favoured Foch 'and so do I, telling him I knew all three & that Foch was the most brilliant by far…'[151] Later in the summer, Foch complained to Wilson about his 'dissatisfaction' with Haig:

> Haig is always civil & nice, but tells him nothing, & the relationship between them is not such that Foch can converse freely with Haig & tell him all his plans & hopes & experiences. Then there is no one on Haig's staff senior enough to go between them, as I used in the old days to work between Sir John & Foch, seeing Foch often twice a day…& possessing Foch's entire confidence and also Sir John's.

At the same meeting Foch told him that he had seen Clemenceau's opposite number as War Minister, Lloyd George, who had apparently criticised Haig while praising Wilson.[152] Even allowing for a degree of hubris, it is possible to see more than a grain of truth in this diary entry. In Wilson's absence, Anglo-French military relations rested for the most part with Sidney Clive, a junior officer with little command experience. One of IV Corps staff officers, Brigadier-General General Staff (BGGS) Hugo de Pree, (a cousin of Haig's) recalled that Wilson and Foch 'used to be closeted together for hours, discussing, gossiping and chaffing. They used to exchange caps and in this get-up they would stride up and down the drawing room, laughing heartily and exchanging experiences.'[153]

Wilson's relationship with other senior French generals was more problematic. He got on well with Joffre's successor Nivelle. In March 1917, during the controversy over Lloyd George's decision to put Haig and the BEF under French command, he returned to familiar ground when he was

[151] Wilson diary, 11 June 1916; Greenhalgh, *Foch*, p. 198.
[152] Ibid., 12 August 1916.
[153] Callwell, *Wilson*, (vol. I), p. 282 and Huguet, *Britain and the War*, p. 129.

persuaded to accept the appointment of Britain's Chief Liaison Officer at *GQG*. This episode in Wilson's career is a case study in the tensions and jostling for power and authority which went on in the senior echelons of the Allied armies during the Great War. Thanks to Lloyd George's sleight of hand the French were once more in the ascendant in deciding Allied strategy, with the British C-in-C effectively under their command. In order to reinforce Nivelle's authority their plan, initially, had been that Wilson would be tantamount to Chief of Staff at *GQG* giving Nivelle's orders direct to Haig 'and the French intended to make sure that he would be a willing instrument in their hands.'[154] Clive, as British Head of Mission at *GQG*, was considered insufficiently senior by Nivelle. The French C-in-C's rationale in requesting Wilson for this role, whatever its official title, merits reiteration in full as it sums up the French view of him and their determination to get him on board:

> I cannot dream of accepting the heavy task which has been entrusted to me in respect of the British Army unless I can have at my disposal a certain number of British staff officers speaking French well, familiar with our methods of work and capable, not only of serving as liaison officers, but also of foreseeing the problems of every kind which we shall have to settle together, and of studying their solution.
> The British General Officer who will be placed at the head of this Mission must have the necessary authority and experience to fill this rôle. That is why I have asked you to have General Wilson nominated to this post; he has both during and before the war done a great deal of work with the French General Staff and for every reason he seems to me to be absolutely qualified to perform these duties. I must be allowed to insist once more on his appointment.[155]

[154] Spears, *Prelude*, p. 144; Wilson diary, 5 February 1917.
[155] Nivelle to Haig, 6 March 1917, in Spears, *Prelude*, Appendix XVI.

Haig resisted the appointment, unsurprisingly considering the hand he had already been dealt by Lloyd George. He finally accepted it when it was agreed that Wilson would report directly to him.[156] Wilson too was reluctant, his diary making clear that he would only accept the position if Haig asked him, and if he could resign if he considered the post untenable. Milner urged him to take the post 'because he did not think that any other man in the world could hold the two armies together.'[157] Wilson agreed after another meeting with Haig at which:

> I told him that within a month of my going to Beauvais [the location of Nivelle's headquarters] any number of people would tell him that I was intriguing to put him out - that in point of fact I probably could put him out if I wished - and so I advised him not to have me but to keep Clive.[158]

Haig 'having concluded that it would be best to trust him' told Wilson he should take the role.[159] Edward Spears, then a junior British liaison officer with the French Army wrote: 'I dined with General Henry Wilson and his officers. He was in splendid form. He had a post that suited him admirably, great power and no responsibility, and he had around him an appreciative audience of particularly clever men.'[160] Egremont noted that Wilson and Spears 'came to loathe each other', and thus the latter's judgements should be treated with caution.[161] Wilson's new posting, however agreeable, did not last long. The failure of Nivelle's offensive and his subsequent downfall also resulted in Wilson's removal. In May, Spears

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[156] Jeffery, *Wilson*, p. 187-8.
[157] Wilson diary, 12 March 1917.
[158] Ibid., 13 March 1917.
[159] Haig diary, 12 March 1917, in Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig: Diaries*, pp. 274-5; Wilson diary, 13 March 1917.
[160] Spears diary, 22 March 1917, in *Prelude*, p. 276
[161] Egremont, *Two Flags*, p. 11.

was promoted to the British Mission in Paris, responsible for liaison between the British and French governments. Pétain succeeded Nivelle, and on 17 May told Spears that he wanted Wilson, whom he did not trust, out of his headquarters by the time he arrived: 'Wilson, Pétain said, was an intriguer: a supporter of the ousted Nivelle, too close to Foch and therefore no friend of his.'[162] Three weeks later Wilson was back in London looking for a job.

Wilson's relationship with Clemenceau was more complex. They were never 'friends', but they developed a level of mutual respect once Clemenceau became French Prime Minister on 19 November 1917, while Wilson was establishing himself at Versailles. Clemenceau was at first opposed to the establishment of the SWC. He favoured a more direct form of unity of command for Allied forces in the west headed by a French general. Nonetheless, Wilson's mix of charm and intellect won over 'the Tiger' who saw him as easier to deal with than his colleagues Robertson and Haig.[163] Wilson's diary reveals that Clemenceau had a distinctive style for getting his way. Several times in the last year of the war Wilson was treated to an outburst of irritation and often anger, usually directed at British generals or the British government's alleged failure to devote sufficient men, materiel and/or fighting spirit to the war. Wilson then had to

[162] Egremont, *Two Flags*, p. 55; Pétain was appointed C-in-C of the French Army on 10 May 1917, with Foch as his CoS.
[163] David S. Newhall, *Clemenceau at War* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), p. 392.

mollify Clemenceau, reassure him of Britain's fidelity as an ally and, sometimes, intercede with Haig on his behalf. Even allowing for the Tiger's politically canny histrionics, Wilson's diplomatic skills usually succeeded in soothing Clemenceau's mood before matters got out of hand and damaged the alliance irretrievably.

CONCLUSION

As the foregoing discussion has shown, Wilson's fondness for gossip and 'intrigue' was not unusual in the officer corps of the British Army at the beginning of the 20th Century. Plenty of his peers also involved themselves in 'politicking' in order to enhance their careers, promote their strategic views, and influence military policy. Where Wilson did stand out was his overt familiarity with politicians, a profession viewed with open cynicism by many of his military colleagues. Wilson's contemporaries understood the need to work with the political tide but usually did so while metaphorically holding their noses. Wilson, instead, cultivated politicians and debated with them on military policy, including conscription, and, as will be discussed later, on his interest in Irish politics. Such openness harmed rather than enhanced Wilson's professional fortunes, especially his role in the Curragh Incident of March 1914. In the next three years Wilson failed to achieve the recognition he felt he deserved following a promising pre-war career. It was only in 1917, when politicians in Britain who saw Wilson's potential were in the ascendant, that his stalled trajectory took flight once more. A similar change in the civil-military leadership in France enhanced his influence and he was able to finally develop his desire for

formalisation of Anglo-French strategic planning and decision-making. As the next chapter explains, he achieved this by proposing the establishment of an independent body to take control of inter-Allied strategy, one headed by politicians advised by military experts acting apart from their general staffs.

CHAPTER TWO

FUTURE STRATEGY PAPER

The paper Wilson submitted to the War Cabinet on 20 October 1917 has received limited attention in the historiography.[1] For Millman it was the product of Wilson's tireless pursuit of self-interest.[2] For Woodward it was the latest weapon in Lloyd George's equally tireless campaign to wrest control of the war from Haig and Robertson, with Wilson little more than a dupe, albeit a willing one.[3] In Jeffery's biography the episode is limited to a brief summary of Wilson's recommendations.[4] This chapter considers the development of Wilson's thinking by analysing the paper in detail for the first time, and aims to set it in its broader strategic context. While Wilson might have seen opportunities for personal advancement, his report deliberately avoided overt criticism of colleagues. He told Lord Esher that he 'had avoided saying a word...that could offend D[ouglas] H[aig] and hoped their relationship would be cordial.'[5] Instead the report was a closely argued critique on the course of the war, and of the events and decisions Wilson believed had brought Britain and her allies to the current impasse on the Western Front. Rather than an exercise in political point-scoring, the paper should be seen as a formal statement of Wilson's long-held strategic views. Had the paper been merely an exercise in criticism of the past, it is doubtful his career would have gained the momentum it did.

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[1] CAB 27/8, WP 61.
[2] Brock Millman, *Pessimism and British War Policy: 1916-1918* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), pp. 155-170.
[3] Woodward, *Lloyd George and the Generals*, esp. pp. 210-11.
[4] Jeffery, *Wilson*, pp. 204-5.
[5] CAC, Esher journal, (ESHR 2/20), 4 November 1917.

Unlike Lord French, who was also consulted, and allowed personal invective to intrude on what was an otherwise detailed review, Wilson adhered to the War Cabinet's request for a study of 'the present state of the war, the future prospects, and the future action to be taken'. His response shaped the characteristics not only of British strategy, but that of her main Allies, for the rest of the war. It paved the way for his appointment as Britain's PMR at the SWC, and confirmed his position as Lloyd George's favoured professional adviser on war policy. Whether he intended it or not, it also served as Wilson's informal application for the post of the government's principal military advisor, the CIGS.

THE PAPERS

Wilson and French were asked to produce their 'appreciations' by the War Cabinet on 11 October 1917.[6] That afternoon they were at work in Lord French's office at Horse Guards, Wilson sitting at Wellington's desk.[7] They conferred throughout the writing period; the two papers, although different in style, were products of extensive collusion.[8] The context for the Cabinet's request was the receipt of status reports from Haig and Robertson. Haig's, requested on 25 September, reviewed the military situation on the Western Front. It offered the C-in-C's views of the British role if Russia dropped out of the war 'having regard to the weakened state

[6] TNA, CAB 23/13/21, War Cabinet, 11 October 1917.
[7] Wilson diary, 11 October 1917.
[8] Wilson's diary records him working alongside or discussing his paper with French on 11, 12, 14, 15, 16 and 17 October 1917, by which time he began sharing them with his political allies, Wilson diary, 11-20 October 1917.

of France and Italy'.[9] Robertson submitted two reports, as requested at a meeting of the War Policy Committee on 5 October. His principal document, in response to Lloyd George's concerns about the costly battles on the Western Front, was an assessment of the prospects for a major offensive in Palestine, specifically, an advance north from the present line at Gaza-Beersheba. His second paper examined such a campaign in detail.[10] There was also a supporting report from the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, on prospects for moving troops to the Middle East to undertake such an offensive.[11] Wilson's analysis, while it took an holistic view of the war thus far, addressed the key elements in both papers.[12] His report was closely argued and impersonal, in stark contrast to Lord French's more discursive invective-ridden assault on two of the British Army's most senior soldiers.[13]

The request for their strategic advice surprised neither Wilson nor French. At a War Cabinet meeting the day before, 'the view was clearly expressed' that Haig's report 'did not provide a convincing argument that we could inflict a decisive military defeat on Germany on the Western Front next year' even if Russia remained an effective participant.[14] As a result, the

[9] TNA, CAB 27/8, GT 2243, Haig to Robertson, 8 October 1917, hereafter CAB 27/8, GT 2243).
[10] TNA, CAB 24/28/42, GT 2242, 'Future Military Policy', and 'Occupation of Jaffa-Jerusalem Line', CIGS to War Cabinet, 9 October 1917.
[11] TNA CAB 27/8, WP 54, 'Question of reinforcing the army in Palestine,' and 'Effect on Imports into the United Kingdom of proposed transfer of troops from France to Egypt,' First Sea Lord to War Cabinet, 9 October 1917.
[12] CAB 27/8, WP 61.
[13] TNA, CAB 27/8, WP 60, 'Present State of the War, future prospects, and future action,' Field Marshal the Lord French to War Cabinet, 20 October 1917, (hereafter CAB 27/8, WP 60).
[14] TNA, CAB 23/13/20, War Cabinet, 10 October 1917.

Prime Minister recalled that at the start of the war, when 'equally grave decisions' had to be taken, his predecessor had called a 'War Council' to hear the views of a range of military experts. That had not happened because of lack of confidence in the commanders, he said. Wilson and French would be invited to offer their views, regardless of possible objections:

> In reply to a suggestion that the Chief of the Imperial General Staff might resent this procedure, the Prime Minister pointed out that neither General Sir Charles Douglas, then Chief of the Imperial General Staff, nor Field Marshal Lord French, the Commander-in-Chief Designate of the British Expeditionary Force had resented the War Council held in August 1914, and he himself would undertake to explain the matter fully to General Robertson.[15]

In fact, according to Esher, the 1914 meeting '<u>was</u> called because <u>no confidence</u> was felt that Sir C Douglas or Sir John French were capable of giving military advice upon such grave issues'.[16] Wilson and French dined with Lloyd George who had 'told Robertson that it is no slight on him but that the patient after a three year course of treatment not being yet cured he thinks it advisable to call in another couple of specialists!'[17] Whatever Lloyd George told Robertson, the latter was not mollified. Hankey noted that Robertson had told Derby he was considering resignation. Curzon had warned him that if the CIGS was forced out he would 'probably' resign, as would Cabinet members Lord Robert Cecil, Carson, the Foreign

[15] TNA, CAB 23/13/20, War Cabinet, 10 October 1917.
[16] CAC, Esher papers, ESHR4, VII (1917), Esher journal, 17 October 1917, original emphasis.
[17] Wilson diary, 10 October 1917. Lloyd George was fond of this medical analogy, using it first at a meeting of the War Policy Committee, TNA CAB WP 27/6, 9 October 1917 (misdated 11 October).

Secretary Arthur Balfour, and Derby.[18] The whole process caused an exasperated Esher to ask: 'Is this Government or Anarchy?'[19]

At the War Cabinet meeting the following day, aware of Curzon's threat, Lloyd George justified his actions by referring to the 'Council of War' of August 1914. He did so 'impartially and judiciously' and was 'quite at his best, handling Robertson (who was as sulky as a bear with a sore head) quite admirably'.[20] He said that in the light of the papers from Haig, the CIGS and the Admiralty he believed there were four 'alternative policies' facing Britain. In short, these were:

1. Concentration of 'the whole of our forces on the Western front' with all other theatres treated as not only subordinate but with forces sufficient for 'safety on the defensive'. This, Lloyd George said, was Haig's recommendation.
2. Concentrate mainly on the Western Front but maintain active operations in other theatres, such as Mesopotamia and Palestine, in the hope that by 'rough handling' the Turks might be induced to 'come to terms'.
3. Lloyd George ascribed the third option to the French C-in-C Pétain. This comprised of limited attacks while concentrating on economic warfare until Russia recovered and the USA could supply enough men to ensure superiority.

[18] CAC, Hankey diary, HNKY 1/3, 10 October 1917, and CAC, Esher journal, 15 October 1917.
[19] Ibid., 17 October 1917.
[20] Ibid., 11 October 1917.

4. Option four was described by the Prime Minister as 'knocking the props from under Germany'. The underlying basis was to counter the loss of Russia by depriving Germany of her Allies, 'with a view to an eventual great concentration against an isolated Germany. This might be achieved by a combination of military and diplomatic operations against Turkey.' First it would be necessary to deliver a major military blow against them.[21]

Lloyd George said 'a turning point in the war' had been reached. Wilson set to work only to be interrupted that afternoon by Milner who told him and French that 'relations between LG and Robertson are impossible. Faults on both sides and mutual dislike. LG often unfair and Robertson often special pleading of gross and offensive type.'[22]

HAIG'S PAPER

This was influenced by the apparent ineffectiveness of Britain's main Allies, and the progress of the Third Battle of Ypres. It was produced during the Battle of Broodseinde, at a time when the offensive was still considered, by the C-in-C at least, to be going the BEF's way.[23] Haig's confidence is clear from his diary, which in the week before the submission of his report referred at least five times to the progress the BEF was making.[24] Unsurprisingly, the conclusion of his report was to

[21] TNA, CAB 23/13/21, War Cabinet, 11 October 1917, pp. 7-8.
[22] Wilson diary, 11 October 1917.
[23] Nick Lloyd, *Passchendaele: A New History* (London: Viking, 2017), pp. 212-3; the Battle of Broodseinde, 4-8 October 1917.
[24] National Library of Scotland (hereafter NLS), Haig papers, Haig (manuscript) diary, Acc. 3155/97, 5 and 7 October 1917.

urge further operations on the Western Front in 1918, building on what he believed were the successes of 1917. In the coming year the main weight of the fighting would fall to the British. While he knew the Prime Minister believed there might be alternatives to concentrating on the Western Front, he wanted to stick to the policy of devoting effort and resources to defeating Germany in the west. Haig, somewhat unconvincingly, said he had examined and 'carefully considered' the other options but there was not one of them 'which offers any prospect of defeating the German armies, and until we defeat those armies I see no prospect of gaining the peace we seek'.[25]

According to Wilson, Lloyd George condemned both Haig and Robertson as:

> …pig-headed stupid and narrow-visioned. Haig has submitted, what LG called, a "preposterous" paper which sets out to prove that the west front is the only front. LG says that, in fact, on Haig's own showing the Western front is a hopeless front. Allenby has apparently said that he needs 2 to 1 to beat the Turks and therefore it would follow that it was no use sending troops out there. Haig claims that even if the Boches are reinforced by 32 Divisions from Russia he can still beat them although inferior in men and guns.[26]

By this stage of the war the C-in-C's positive outlook was viewed by some senior politicians with more than a degree of cynicism, with his head of intelligence Charteris fielding much of the criticism. Haig's optimism failed to convince Esher. It was 'too long and too discursive; but it is elevated in tone, and very sanguine about prospects on this Front. I did not care much

[25] CAB 27/8, GT 2243, p. 2.
[26] Wilson diary, 10 October 1917.

for it.'[27] As will be seen, Haig's 'sanguine' approach to the threats facing his front coloured British strategy into the spring of 1918. According to Wilson, Derby agreed with him that Haig's staff was 'rotten and that all his forecasts are wrong and that Robertson endorses them. But Derby is a weak creature... he cursed Charteris heartily which amused me.'[28] Derby had turned against GHQ's head of intelligence in February 1917 for his overly optimistic appraisals, telling Lloyd George that Haig had been 'badly let down by Charteris'.[29] Esher said Charteris was considered a "national danger" by all the Army Commanders, and goes by the name of the "U. Boat".'[30]

ROBERTSON'S PAPER

Robertson's submission had a similarly critical reception. It took a familiar, strongly pro-Western Front position, with gloomy predictions for the prospects of expanded operations in Palestine. An offensive towards Jerusalem, even if successful, entailed extending the British front from 30 to 50 miles. He predicted at least three costly battles against strong Turkish resistance leading to 'little result beyond the moral advantages which we may gain'.[31] Worse, he calculated that the British force of seven infantry and three cavalry divisions would need reinforcing by three

[27] CAC, Esher papers, Esher Journal, 15 October 1917, original emphasis.
[28] Wilson diary, 16 October 1917.
[29] Lloyd George papers, LG-F14-4-21, quoted in Sheffield, *The Chief*, pp. 204; see also p. 258; for a more balanced critique of Charteris's role see Jim Beach, *Haig's Intelligence: GHQ and the German Army, 1916-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015 [2013]), esp. pp. 48-56.
[30] CAC, Esher journal, ESHR 2/20, 16 October 1917.
[31] CAB 24/28/42, GT 2242, 'Occupation of Jaffa-Jerusalem Line,' CIGS to War Cabinet, 9 October 1917, pp. 1, 3 and 7.

infantry divisions plus two in relief.[32] This, Robertson claimed, meant that 'Turkish territory will become, for an indefinite period, the decisive theatre and the West front must meanwhile be delegated to secondary importance.'[33] He warned of 'disastrous' consequences if the government insisted on major offensives on two fronts; expecting success from concentrated action in the Middle East would be a 'more dangerous' gamble than usual.[34] The estimate of forces required for a push to Jerusalem increased when General Sir Edmund Allenby, C-in-C Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF), reported that he would, in fact, need 14 infantry divisions, and another six in relief, a demand one authority described as 'one of the most absurd appreciations every presented to a British government.'[35]

The Royal Navy estimated it needed 100 ships to transport six divisions from France to the Middle East, with them arriving no sooner than the third week of February 1918. This would mean that 'the whole of the traffic in the Mediterranean' would be 'seriously interfered with', with severe impacts on supplies of coal and wheat to Italy which was already struggling to resist the Central Powers.[36] As for the consequences at home, diverting transports from trans-Atlantic convoys would reduce

[32] CAB 24/28/42, GT 2242, pp. 4-5.
[33] TNA, CAB 24/28/42, GT 2242, 'Future Military Policy,' CIGS to War Cabinet, 9 October 1917, p 1.
[34] Ibid., pp. 1-2.
[35] Woodward, *Lloyd George*, p. 205; CAB 27/8, WP 52, Allenby to CIGS, 10 October 1917.
[36] TNA CAB 27/8, WP 54, 'Question of reinforcing the army in Palestine,' First Sea Lord to War Cabinet, 9 October 1917, pp 1 and 3.

British imports by up to 1.2 million tons from November 1917 to December 1918.[37]

WILSON'S PAPER

Wilson's Paper was as much concerned with the political-military interface as with pure military strategy. In Wilson's view, Britain's war policy thus far had been reactive rather than proactive. Britain had 'tried to adapt ourselves to the ever-changing, ever-increasing demands, but, generally speaking, following on German leads rather than taking a line of our own. As examples we have Gallipoli, Salonica [sic], the defence of the Suez Canal and Kut.' A review was required because in three years Britain had moved 'from being the most "contemptible" to being the most formidable' of Germany's enemies.[38] Russia was effectively lost as an ally, to be replaced by the USA which might be of significant value in 'the somewhat distant and problematical future.'[39] Wilson was not, unlike Haig, convinced that the time was right or the resources available to strike a decisive blow in the west. Haig had said he was 'confident that if the course I have recommended be adopted whole-heartedly we shall gain far more than a limited success in the field next year.'[40] Wilson disagreed. It was 'no use throwing "decisive numbers at the decisive time at the decisive place" at my head if the decisive numbers do not exist, if the decisive hour has not struck or if the decisive plan is ill-chosen.'[41]

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[37] TNA CAB 27/8, WP 54, 'Effect on Imports into the United Kingdom of proposed transfer of troops from France to Egypt,' First Sea Lord to War Cabinet, 9 October 1917, p. 2.
[38] CAB 27/8, WP 61, p. 3.
[39] Ibid., pp. 3-4.
[40] CAB 27/8, GT 2243, pp. 13-14.
[41] CAB 27/8, WP 61, p. 4.

For Wilson, timing was crucial. The autumn of 1917 saw discussion amongst politicians and public about the prospects for a negotiated peace. In September, the Germans had made indirect overtures to the French and British governments hinting at a compromise in which Germany seemed 'willing to accept defeat in the West for compensations in the East'.[42] British politicians were concerned that a war-weary France might sue for peace. Esher set the tone for those who might be prepared to consider a compromise. He told Robertson that awaiting the Americans seemed to be the favoured French policy and 'what a policy!':

> The sooner our excellent rulers make Peace the better. Why not accept the terms offered by Germany? They are more favourable than we are likely to obtain this day twelvemonth…as matters stand, no unbiased mind can resist the conclusion that while we have bested the Germans in the West, they have won, hands down, on the Eastern Front.[43]

Esher told Haig that it was 'amazing' that Lloyd George and some of his colleagues could 'not see that their sole chance of making a favourable peace is to balance the tremendous successes of Germany on the Eastern Front by equally striking ones on the Western.'[44] Esher was known for his pessimism. In December 1916, he had given Wilson the impression that he did not think Britain could win the war.[45] Nonetheless, Russia's inability to fight added to fears that the Allies might be forced to

[42] David R. Woodward, 'David Lloyd George, a negotiated peace with Germany, and the Kulhmann Peace Kite of September 1917', *Canadian Journal of History*, March 1971 vol. VI (1), p. 86.
[43] CAC, Esher papers, Esher to Robertson, 22 October 1917.
[44] Ibid., Esher to Haig, 23 October 1917.
[45] Wilson diary, 1 December 1916.

seek a compromise.[46] Millman has argued that British grand strategy from mid-1916 until the end of the war was characterised by a general feeling of 'pessimism' amounting to defeatism. Some of Britain's political and military leaders were focussed on concluding the war on acceptable terms, in contrast to their public utterances epitomised by Lloyd George's commitment to total victory thanks to a 'knockout blow' on the Western Front.[47] Wilson took a more positive view than Millman allowed. He remained opposed to a compromise peace and was confident that, with changes to strategic decision-making, Britain could emerge from the war with her Empire and prestige intact. His advice to the War Cabinet made clear that if a compromise was forced upon Britain:

> It is incontestable that the German position is better to-day with all the gains I have mentioned above (vis-à-vis terms of peace) than it would be had they not gained Turkey as Allies, had they not effectively occupied all the Balkans, Roumania [sic], Poland and part or Russia; had they in fact, during the last two years, restricted themselves to attempting a final decision, as we have done in the main theatre, i.e. the West.[48]

He was making these points now, not because the West 'is not the decisive front – because it is', but because the final decision could only be reached when the decisive numbers were applied at the decisive place 'and the place and the time are not yet, and the Germans are trying their best that they never shall be'.[49]

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[46] For the War Cabinet discussion on the German peace overtures of Autumn 1917, see TNA, CAB 23/16/2, War Cabinet, 24 September 1917 (Hankey, handwritten draft).
[47] Millman, *Pessimism*, and idem, 'A Counsel of Despair: British Strategy and War Aims, 1917-18', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 36 (2), (2001), pp. 252-4.
[48] CAB 27/8, WP 61, pp. 5-6.
[49] Ibid., p. 6.

Wilson summarised his views in a section headed 'the Future'. He asked if it were possible for the Allies, 'now that we are only three instead of four – for the moment I do not count America', to 'enlarge our view' and draw up plans so that 'when the decisive moment arrives we can produce the decisive numbers at the decisive place?'[50] According to Wilson there were three, not necessarily mutually exclusive, routes towards attaining this object:

(i) By eliminating some of the smaller of our enemies and thus releasing all the troops and material we now have in such secondary theatres – and incidentally setting free a large amount of tonnage.
(ii) By recruiting the necessary number of men, and placing them in the field where and when required.
(iii) By an enormous and overwhelming increase in guns, munitions, aeroplanes, tanks and all engines of war.[51]

Regardless of which course(s) the War Cabinet chose, and this was the principal theme throughout, it was 'essential that a much closer and more effective co-operation' should be established between the Allies.[52]
The next section of this chapter considers these potential routes.

THEATRES OF WAR

Haig's assessment of the state of the war and prospects for 1918 was clear. While allowing for the possibility of 'local' successes against Turkey or Austria-Hungary, this would weaken the British position on the Western Front. The BEF would have to go on the defensive, with the negative impact that would have on French morale. If Britain rejected large-scale

[50] CAB 27/8, WP 61, p. 7.
[51] Ibid., pp. 7-8.
[52] Ibid., p. 8.

offensive actions in France and Flanders in 1918 there was no likelihood of either France or Italy conducting offensives of their own. As for the nascent American forces, they would 'not be capable of achieving any important results alone by offensive action next year'.[53] Therefore, 'success on the Western front is the only real alternative to an unsatisfactory peace'.[54] At this point, in his personal copy of Haig's report, Wilson wrote: 'This is true but what is under consideration is whether such a success would not be made easier if Turkey (& Bulgaria) were knocked.'[55] For Haig: 'The question for decision therefore, is whether the allies are capable of overcoming the Germans on the Western front even though Russia should be unable to take an active part in the war next year.'[56] Wilson disagreed: 'No. This is only part of the question,' he wrote in the margin.[57]

Despite knowing that the Prime Minister harboured hopes of winning important victories in other theatres, Haig urged that 'we must take risks elsewhere and cut down our commitments in all other theatres to the minimum necessary to protect really vital interests'. Britain should adopt a similar approach to its Allies and stand back from assisting them directly. It was not in the Allied interest for 'the only really effective offensive army which will exist next year' to throw away 'what is a good prospect and practically the only prospect of a real victory by disseminating its

[53] CAB 27/8, GT 2243, p. 3.
[54] Ibid., p. 3.
[55] IWM, Wilson papers, 3/13/16, 'Notes on Sir D. Haig's Memo of 8 Oct 1917'.
[56] CAB 27/8, GT 2243, pp. 3-4.
[57] Wilson papers, 3/13/16.

forces…Great Britain has not the means to maintain more than one offensive.'[58]

Robertson agreed. Even if successful in Palestine 'the military effect would be of no value to us'.[59] It was 'very desirable' to reduce the number of Britain's enemies, but since Russia's 'collapse' he did not see an extensive offensive campaign in Palestine 'as a sound military measure'. In his view 'the right military course to pursue is to act on the defensive in Palestine and the east generally, and continue to seek a decision in the West'.[60] Throughout the war Robertson consistently opposed any large-scale offensives that would impact negatively on Britain's effort in the west. In 1915, he condemned the forthcoming Gallipoli offensive as a 'ridiculous farce'.[61] Once he became CIGS he was, from time to time, prepared to consider actions away from France and Flanders, to exploit perceived enemy weaknesses or to boost morale at home. He would not, however, subjugate the BEF's needs for those of armies in other theatres.[62]

In response Wilson reiterated his strategic belief in the primacy of the Western Front. On this point at least, he emphasised, he was in step with his colleagues:

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[58] CAB 27/8, GT 2243, p. 11.
[59] CAB 24/28/42, GT 2242, 'Future Military Policy,' CIGS to War Cabinet, 9 October 1917, p. 3.
[60] Ibid., p. 4.
[61] Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (hereafter LHCMA), King's College London, Papers of Field Marshal Sir William Robertson, (7/2/15), Robertson to Callwell, 19 March 1915.
[62] See esp. Woodward, *Robertson*, pp. 114-123 and 157-168.

> I have always been (even years before the war broke out) and I shall always remain, an ardent "Westerner", for the simple reason that it is along the west front that the bulk of the forces of our principal enemy is disposed and the death-grapple must be engaged in at the time and place and in the manner best suited to our cause.[63]

Britain, he said, had been unable to consider the 'decisive maxim' (major offensives with the potential for strategically important results) until Spring 1916. The Battle of the Somme had been 'one of the steps we are treading to a final decision'. Since then 'we have had several attempts at a final decision, or shall we call them steps towards a final decision, notably at Arras, Messines, Ypres, Chemin-des-Dames, Champagne and Verdun, but the final decision has not yet been reached.'[64] For Wilson, Britain's single-mindedness on the Western Front meant potential opportunities had been missed elsewhere:

> In no other theatre than along the Western front has any serious attempt been made by us during the last twenty months to reach a decision in that theatre...We have been unwavering and unwearying in our hopes and in our actions to gain a final decision by a series of actions each of which we hoped would have given us that decision, but which, as events proved, were only steps in [sic] the ladder leading to the final decision.[65]

Wilson questioned Haig's and Robertson's continuing optimism for decisive results in the west in 1918: 'We seem to be as confident of success when Russia and Roumania have collapsed and France is temporarily weakened as we were when all these three countries were capable of heavy offensive actions.'[66] Conversely, Germany, having failed

[63] CAB 27/8, WP 61, p. 4.
[64] Ibid., p. 5.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.

to win in the west in 1914, had turned eastwards and had 'succeeded in the Balkans, in Roumania and now in Russia.' Germany's plan had been to gain territory and supplies 'and put himself in the position to mass a much larger number of troops in the decisive theatre (i.e. in the West) when the time for the death-grapple came.'[67]

Although Lloyd George had long favoured 'knocking away the props',[68] Wilson believed opportunities 'to "knock out" some of our smaller antagonists', had disappeared.[69] As far as Austria-Hungary was concerned the matter was 'too complex' and 'eminently fitted' for a decision by a 'Superior Council'.[70] Bulgaria could not be tackled until Turkey had been taken out of the war. As for Turkey, the Allies had missed the boat. Wilson had, he said, been a long-time advocate of 'getting Turkey out of the war.' In a rare criticism in this document of his military colleagues Wilson went on:

> I cannot help thinking that, had we taken a somewhat broader and longer view of different theatres and made a juster [sic] appreciation of the moment for the decisive action, we could, and we ought to, have detached Turkey, and with her probably Bulgaria. But this is in the past, and the question here is – can we do so in the future.[71]

The answer, he concluded, was 'no'. This was a significant change of heart. Less than three weeks earlier Wilson had told Rawlinson that he favoured sending '10 or 12 D[i]vs to Egypt to make sure of beating the

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[67] CAB 27/8, WP 61, p.5
[68] Lloyd George had been a supporter of seeking alternative theatres to the Western Front since early 1915, see Woodward, *Lloyd George*, pp. 28-9.
[69] CAB 27/8, WP 61, p. 8.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid., p.8.

Turks this winter [and] bringing them back to France for the summer offensive of 1918…HW is for concentrating on the Turk this winter.'[72] At a meeting with Lord French and the Prime Minister, the latter had been 'mad to knock out the Turk in the winter' and a similarly enthusiastic Wilson had 'expressed the strong belief that if a really good scheme was thoroughly well worked out, we could chase the Turks out of Palestine and very likely knock them completely out during the mud months, without in any way interfering with Haig's operations next Spring and Summer'.[73] Once required to provide an authoritative assessment, and demonstrating a mix of both opportunism and pragmatism, Wilson changed his mind. On the day the War Cabinet asked for his views, and in the light of Robertson's and Jellicoe's negative reports, Wilson discussed the issue with the French CoS, Foch, who thought it 'late for Syria [Palestine] and we must spend the winter in making guns, arms etc.'[74] By the following day he had concluded that 'we are late to plan and carry out an attack on the Turks this winter' and thus 'this confines us to Europe'.[75] Having garnered the facts Wilson came 'very reluctantly, to the conclusion that we are too late'.[76] It was a notable conclusion, bearing in mind the Prime Minister's abiding interest in other theatres. Wilson explained that a successful offensive against Turkey in either Palestine or Mesopotamia would have had to have been carried out during the 'mud-months' in France, a period spanning 1 November and 30 April, when weather in the region was

[72] CAC, Papers of Sir Henry Rawlinson, Rawlinson Journal, RWLN 1/9, 2 October 1917.
[73] Wilson diary, 5 October 1917 (original emphasis).
[74] Ibid., 11 October 1917.
[75] Ibid., 12 October 1917
[76] CAB 27/8, WP 61, pp. 8-9.

'admirably suited for campaigning. We are too late now – in the middle of October – to make plans for the coming winter, and we are too late for other reasons also.'[77] Robertson's study had claimed two German divisions were available to reinforce the Turks and, if it became clear Britain intended a major offensive, more would be sent.[78] Wilson agreed. The Germans had anticipated British intentions and had 'taken a much firmer grip of the Turk, they have massed a large force in a central position, they have accumulated munitions and stores and vastly improved the communications in the Asiatic theatre.'[79] Another problem was shortage of troops. Agreeing with Haig and Robertson, Wilson advised that there would be insufficient manpower to send the necessary force to campaign in the Middle East and to remain effective in the west.[80] Thirdly, he reiterated the Admiralty view that 'dwindling tonnage and difficulties of escort would make the transportation, upkeep and return of the necessary force impossible'.[81] Wilson then sounded the death-knell for future large-scale adventures against Turkey:

> For all these reasons, but not because the West is the decisive theatre in the winter, I am clearly of opinion that it is impossible to send an expedition against the Turks this winter *and wrong to send an expedition next spring or summer*.[82]

Thereafter, though Lloyd George returned to the point often, the War Cabinet's appetite for major offensives away from the Western Front, on

[77] CAB 27/8, WP 61, p. 9.
[78] CAB 27/8, GT 2242, 'Occupation of Jaffa-Jerusalem Line,' CIGS to War Cabinet, 9 October 1917, p. 4.
[79] CAB 27/8, WP 61, p. 9.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid., my italics.

the premise that of themselves they would bring about Germany's defeat, waned. Wilson, as will be discussed, continued to pay lip-service to the notion, but at Versailles and later as CIGS, he ensured the BEF's manpower would not be denuded at the expense of major offensives elsewhere. In future, initiatives beyond France and Flanders would be motivated by the defence and extension of Britain's imperial interests rather than as potential war-winning operations. As result they would be limited, pragmatic and always subservient to operations in the west.

MANPOWER/RESOURCES

Wilson argued that Britain and her Allies would not be ready for a major offensive in the west in 1918. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, he had been a long-time and prominent advocate of conscription, including conscription for Ireland, and was in step with his military colleagues who believed the government could and should do more to provide men for the war.[83] However, Haig and Wilson disagreed on a crucial point. Haig believed that with concerted effort the BEF could conduct a major offensive in 1918. Wilson did not. According to Haig, Germany had so far brought few divisions to the Western Front from the Eastern. Evidence, he believed, that Germany 'does not expect any immediate total collapse in Russia'.[84] Wilson noted in his copy of Haig's report: 'This may be so but it may equally be taken as affording truth that Germany is not really frightened by our present attack?' The marginalia records that Wilson's

[83] Jeffery, *Wilson*, esp., pp. 196-7 and 222-3.
[84] CAB 27/8, GT 2243, p. 4.

discussions with the DMI Macdonogh, 'make clear that the Boch [sic] can draw, easily, on the Russian front'.[85] In fact, as the latest history of the campaign shows, Wilson was wrong. The recent fighting had pushed the Germans to the limits of their endurance.[86] According to Haig, of the 147 German divisions on his front, 135 had been driven from their positions or withdrawn 'broken by their losses' since 1 April 1917, 'many of them twice and some three times…I quote this as proof of what our armies are capable of.'[87] Wilson did not question the statistics but instead asked: 'How many English and French divisions have been roughly handled in the same period?'[88] Haig insisted that in the light of such favourable circumstances it should be:

> Beyond question that our offensive must be pursued as long as possible. I have every hope of being able to continue it for several weeks still and of gaining results which will add very greatly to the enemy's losses in men and moral[e], and place us in a far better position to resume an offensive in the spring. Amongst other advantages, we shall end this year's campaign with practically all the observation points originally held by the enemy in our possession – a very important consideration.[89]

As Haig's recent biographer noted, capture of the Bourlon Ridge would allow British artillery to bring down accurate fire on the Hindenburg Line, and on the important railhead at Cambrai.[90] Thus Haig was confident of entering next year's campaigning season 'with excellent prospects of decisive success if we throw into the scale wholeheartedly the full weight of the Empire's strength and if Russia can maintain on her front even the

[85] Wilson papers, 3/13/16, 'Notes on Sir D. Haig's Memo of 8 Oct 1917'.
[86] Lloyd, *Passchendaele*, pp. 217-8, 292.
[87] CAB 27/8, GT 2243, p. 4.
[88] Wilson papers, 3/13/16.
[89] CAB 27/8, GT 2243, p. 5.
[90] Sheffield, *The Chief*, p. 253.

number of German divisions now there'. He added: 'Future developments in Russia are so uncertain that in considering our future plans we cannot ignore the possibility that she may be able to do at least as much.'[91] Wilson was sceptical, noting 'the assumption about Russia is a large one'.[92] Nonetheless, as Haig conceded, the Prime Minister had asked the C-in-C for his proposed policy in the event of Russian capitulation. If this happened, Haig believed, Germany would have to keep 59 divisions in the east to monitor Russian activity and to supervise her allies in the region. Haig thought Germany could only divert 32 divisions to the west, bringing the complement to 179 divisions.[93] By 1 April 1918, these would be faced by 176 Allied divisions, comprising 62 British divisions 'if our forces in France remain as they are', 100 French, 12 American and 2 Portuguese.[94] He conceded that at 'first sight such a force would appear to be insufficient to justify the hope of a successful offensive on this front next year', but 19 of the German divisions were of 'poor quality, only fit for defensives on quiet fronts'.[95] Wilson asked 'what of the Belgian, the Portuguese, the Americans and some French'.[96] Haig claimed German losses were being largely replaced by 'quite inferior material' and that by May or June 1918 'the German reserves will be exhausted.'[97] Alongside this statement Wilson wrote: 'What of the French and British Reserves.'[98] As for troop numbers, Haig calculated that the Allies would be up to 30% stronger

[91] CAB 27/8, GT 2243, p. 6.
[92] Wilson papers, 3/13/16.
[93] In fact, by 15 February 1918 there were 195 German divisions on the Western Front, Greenhalgh, *Foch*, p. 284.
[94] CAB 27/8, GT 2243, p. 7.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Wilson papers, 3/13/16.
[97] CAB 27/8, GT 2243, p. 7.
[98] Wilson Papers, 3/13/16.

thanks to the greater number of battalions, and of men in battalions, in British, American and Portuguese divisions.[99] Wilson made a note to check this claim with the DMI and subsequently wrote in his copy 'Macdonogh agrees.'[100] Wilson disagreed with the assertion that the 100 French divisions Haig calculated on having available in 1918 could be considered as 'fully equivalent' to the same number of German divisions facing them, writing: 'This is not the present state of affairs.'[101] Wilson was right to be sceptical. Between 1 November 1917 and March 1918, the Germans moved 48 divisions from east to west (with two going in the opposite direction), and eight more from Italy to the Western Front. On 21 March, the first day of Operation Michael, the start of the German Spring Offensives, there were 191 German divisions on the Western Front, 22 more than Haig had predicted.[102]

Thus, Haig was 'confident that the British Armies in France, assisted by the French and American Armies, will be quite capable of carrying through a sustained and successful offensive next year,' but only if certain conditions were met. Diverting troops would put this 'successful offensive' at risk, he warned. All the 62 British divisions currently in France would be needed, at full establishment, with new drafts trained by early spring. Moreover, 'further drafts to replace wastage in next year's offensive should be trained and sent to France in time to take their place in the ranks when

[99] CAB 27/8, GT 2243, pp. 7-8.
[100] Wilson papers, 3/13/16.
[101] CAB 27/8, GT 2243, p. 8, and Wilson papers, 3/13/16.
[102] David T. Zabecki, *The German 1918 Offensives: A case study in the operational level of war* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), pp. 89-90.

required'.[103] Wilson's note on his copy of the Haig paper noted that Macready, the AG, and Sir Auckland Geddes, the Director of National Service, 'profess this is impossible'.[104] French demands for the BEF to take over more line had to be resisted to allow troops to recover, take leave and be trained. This would be 'both justifiable and wise', particularly as the French armies were unlikely to consent to major offensives in the foreseeable future, 'since the British armies alone can be made capable of a great offensive effort it is beyond argument that everything should be done by our allies as well as ourselves to enable that effort to be made as strong as possible...'[105] Correctly predicting French opposition, Haig argued that the best test of commitment was not the actual length of line held, but the numbers of enemy divisions faced, and the intended role of the armies concerned in the offensive he wanted to launch next spring. It was necessary therefore to 'refuse to take over more line and to adhere resolutely to that refusal, even to the point of answering threats by threats if necessary'.[106] Wilson wrote 'Whew!' against this sentence.[107]

Having consulted Macdonogh on Haig's manpower assumptions, Wilson concluded that Britain could not recruit 'a sufficient number of men to overwhelm the enemy by numbers', at least not until the USA was able to 'transport very large forces and maintain them in the field, and this will certainly not be the case in 1918'.[108] None of Britain's main European

[103] CAB 27/8, GT 2243, p. 8.
[104] Wilson papers, 3/13/16.
[105] CAB 27/8, GT 2243, p. 9.
[106] Ibid., p. 10.
[107] Wilson papers, 3/13/16.
[108] CAB 27/8, WP 61, p. 10.

Allies was in a position to assist. Unlike Haig, whose paper still held out some hope that the Russians would continue as a viable force, Wilson considered them relevant only for the numbers of German troops which would be diverted to the west when they collapsed. Early in 1917 Wilson had undertaken an inspection tour of Russia, and although his initial impressions of the Tsarist forces had been positive, he became less sanguine once he returned to London.[109] He calculated, like Haig, that once Russia withdrew from the war, something he considered imminent, Germany would be able to divert 'between 20 and 40 divisions' to the west.[110] As for the Italians, their own commanders felt it unlikely they could maintain their present numbers into 1918.[111] Worse still, the French army was 'already declining' and would soon be forced to reduce its number of divisions.[112]

Wilson then turned to the British position. In his personal copy of Haig's report, annotated in his own hand, he highlighted the C-in-C's assumptions about both recruitment and 'wastage' and noted he would check them with Macdonogh, the DMI. Although a long-standing ally of Robertson, Macdonogh also worked amicably with Wilson and briefed him at least twice during the writing of his report.[113] As a result, Wilson told the War Cabinet that the British were 'roughly speaking' in the following position:

[109] Wilson diary, 10, 14 February 1917.
[110] CAB 27/8, WP 61, p. 11.
[111] Ibid, p. 10.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Wilson diary, 12, 16 October 1917.

> If the Infantry in France is filled up to establishment now – we are at this moment some 50,000 to 60,000 Infantry under establishment – and if we take, in the coming 12 months, a punishment equal to that which we have taken in the last 12 months, then the present deficit of 50,000 to 60,000 will be turned into a deficit of anything from 100,000 to 200,000.

In the 12 months from October 1918 the situation would be even worse 'with nothing in Reserve to make good wastage except the boys who become matured and returned Expeditionary Force men', that is, those who had been wounded and returned to the ranks.[114]

The German position, he argued, was more positive. Against a growing British shortfall, and not taking into account the potential for up to 40 additional divisions currently facing the Russians, Wilson calculated Germany had an extra 100,000 men available for the front line in field depots. In Germany, Macdonogh reported, there were another 620,000 fit men. To this could be added an estimated half a million young men from the '1920 Class' of recruits. This came to a potential 1.2 million men available for drafting in Germany in the coming 12 months.[115] This was twice the figure Haig's paper had predicted.[116] In fact, as Zabecki has noted, while at the beginning of 1918 there were 1.1 million men fit for field service employed in German war industries, it was not thought practical to put them in uniform. The next 'class' of new recruits, totalling 637,000 men, higher than Macdonogh's estimate, would not be ready until the autumn of 1918.[117] In reality, GHQ's estimate of the German manpower

[114] CAB 27/8, WP 61, p. 10.
[115] Zabecki, *German Offensives*, pp. 89-93.
[116] CAB 27/8, GT 2243, p. 5.
[117] Zabecki, *German Offensives*, pp. 89-93.

situation was more accurate than that of the General Staff at the War Office. At the time, however, distrust in London of the assessments of Haig's intelligence operation meant his pronouncements were received with scepticism.[118] In the light of such contradictory predictions it is not surprising that Wilson concluded this section with the assessment that 'until the Americans can be got over in sufficient force we cannot hope to beat the enemy by force of numbers'.[119] The manpower challenge continued to dominate British strategy for the rest of the war.

SUPERIOR DIRECTION

Having undermined the optimistic predictions of Haig and Robertson, Wilson's argument moved to its denouement. In his report Haig had taken a dim view of inter-Allied control of war strategy. In a reference to the failed Nivelle Offensive of April 1917, when he and his army had been placed under French orders,[120] he recommended that in future, Britain should:

> Insist on occupying the predominant positions in the Councils of the Allies to which our strength entitles us. More than once already we have subordinated our judgement to that of our allies with highly unsatisfactory results. We cannot afford to make such mistakes again, and whatever they may threaten [,] our allies cannot afford to quarrel with us. [121]

Robertson believed 'the principle of "unity of command" and "one front" must be cautiously applied. In theory it is attractive, in practice it has not

[118] Beach, *Haig's Intelligence*, pp. 256-259.
[119] CAB 27/8, WP 61, p. 11.
[120] For the placing of Haig under French orders and the subsequent Nivelle Offensive see esp. Sheffield, *The Chief*, pp. 204-222, and French, *Strategy* pp. 52-61.
[121] TNA, CAB 27/8, WP 61, p. 12.

been encouraging.' Like Haig he reminded the War Cabinet that it was 'responsible for the Nivelle era and its consequences'. As far as Robertson was concerned, Allied co-operation had seen Britain and France obliged to send 150 heavy guns to Italy, and another 550 to Russia. 'All are lost to us,' he said.[122] Despite these guns, diverted from Flanders, the Italians had cancelled a promised offensive and decided to adopt a 'more passive attitude' on their front. General Luigi Cadorna, the Italian Army's commander, thought this *volte-face* 'would not prejudice Allied operations elsewhere'.[123] In the light of these developments Robertson was dismissive of Britain's Allies' willingness to fight. In his view, the French had also 'failed us badly this year' and 'must be made to fight'. Thus:

> As far as "unity of command" is concerned, we should endeavour to acquire for ourselves the control of operations next year on the West front, as we are entitled to do by our successes this year, the efficiency and spirit of our Armies, and the stability of our Government as compared with that of practically all our European Allies.[124]

As a long-term advocate of closer Allied co-operation, Wilson disagreed. Lloyd George had discussed the notion of a form of superior direction with him in August and suggested a trio of senior officers to review Robertson's recommendations. Wilson had counselled against this as unfair to Robertson, but maintained the view that an inter-Allied body, including senior political representatives, was required.[125] While writing his policy paper, Wilson met the French Minister of Propaganda, Henri Franklin-

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[122] TNA, CAB 24/28/42, GT 2242, 'Future Military Policy', CIGS to War Cabinet, 9 October 1917, pp. 6-7.
[123] TNA, CAB 23/4/12, War Cabinet, 24 September 1917.
[124] TNA, CAB 24/28/42, GT 2242, 'Future Military Policy', CIGS to War Cabinet, 9 October 1917, pp. 6.
[125] Wilson diary, 23 August 1917.

Bouillon, and pressed on him 'the necessity of the Superior Organisation which I think essential to the prosecution of the war and he was much taken with it and said he would discuss it with LG this afternoon.'[126] The next day Wilson had lunch at the Ritz with Lloyd George, Franklin-Bouillon, the French Prime Minister Paul Painlevé 'and another minister (with a snub nose).' The French delegation was in London to urge Britain to take over more French line, to discuss Middle East strategy, and recent German peace overtures.[127] Wilson took the opportunity to lobby support for his idea:

> All were insistent on my going back to Paris [as head of liaison] but, as I told them, unless the Superior War Cabinet is started there is no place for me. At the lunch I drew a graphic for the snub-nose of this organisation (on the back of his menu) which he made me sign, and Painlevé, who was sitting on my left insisted on my drawing a similar graphic for him and signing it.[128]

In his report Wilson avoided the implication that 'superior direction' of the war would inevitably mean 'unity of command' at the military level, offering assurances to the soldiers about their future status *vis-a-vis* such an organisation. There seems little doubt, however, that this was his ultimate expectation.[129] After dining with Lloyd George and French on 17 October he wrote:

> It became very clear to me tonight that LG means to get Robertson out and means to curb the powers of the CinC in the field. This is what I have been advising the last 2 ½ years and this is what the whole of my paper is directed to. Not to getting R[obertson] put out

[126] Wilson diary, 12 October 1917.
[127] TNA, CAB 23/13/20, War Cabinet Minutes, 10 October 1917, and CAC, Esher journal, 15 October 1917.
[128] Wilson diary, 13 October 1917; Hankey, diary, 13 October 1917, in Hankey, *Supreme Command*, (2 vols.), (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961), (vol. II), p. 712.
[129] As Chapter 5 illustrates, the definition of the concept of 'unity of command' differed over the course of the war, and between soldiers and statesmen.

> but to forming an [sic] Superior Direction over all the CGSs and CinCs.[130]

In 1915 Wilson had written to Bonar Law advocating a 'Committee of Six', made up of the British and French C-in-Cs, Foreign Secretaries and War Secretaries, to adjudicate on joint strategic plans.[131] In August 1917, while 'unemployed' on half-pay, Wilson revived the idea and discussed it twice with the Prime Minister.[132] Little wonder then that in his final report he advised that it was at the political-strategic interface where fundamental change was required. He told his War Cabinet audience that he did not believe the current state of affairs was the fault of the senior generals.[133] Instead, he implied, responsibility lay with them, and other Allied leaders, because: 'The superior direction of this war has, in my opinion been gravely at fault from the very commencement – in fact, it is inside the truth to say that there has never been any superior direction at all.'[134] At first reading this might have appeared a career-limiting conclusion, especially for a soldier so experienced in the dark arts of political intrigue. In fact, Wilson was in no peril. He and Lloyd George had discussed the subject several times; the Prime Minister was not going to be surprised by Wilson's conclusions.[135] Joffre, while in command of the French armies, had tried: 'With poor results indeed but still he tried, to assume and

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[130] Wilson diary, 17 October 1917.
[131] PA, Bonar Law papers, Wilson to Bonar Law, (BL 51/4/31 and BL 52/1/10), 27 October and 3 December 1915.
[132] Wilson diary, 16 and 23 August 1917, and Riddell, *War Diary*, 14 August 1917, p. 265.
[133] 'This tendency to narrowness of vision is not due, it seems to me, to any fault of our military Chiefs but to another cause which I shall refer to later,' CAB 27/8, WP 61, p 7.
[134] CAB 27/8, WP 61, pp. 11-12.
[135] Wilson met Lloyd George and discussed this and related issues on 5, 10, 13 and 17 October 1917, Wilson diary.

exercise a kind of benevolent control over all the Allies, but his position was not sufficiently exalted his powers were not sufficiently great to admit of success.'[136] Since then the Allies had tried 'many expedients but always with most disappointing, sometimes even with disastrous results':

> We have had frequent meetings of Ministers, constant conversations between Chiefs of the Staffs, deliberations of Commanders-in-Chiefs, Mass [sic] meetings of all these high officials in London, in Paris, in Rome. We have tried the experiment of placing one Commander-in-Chief under the orders of another, and all these endeavours have failed to attain any real concerted and co-ordinated effort in diplomacy, in strategy, in fighting or in the production of war material.[137]

For Wilson, the failure of Britain and France and more recently Italy to address the issue of co-ordinated control had resulted in fragmented and self-seeking strategies:

> Curiously enough, our constant thought of a decision in the West – a frame of mind amounting almost to an obsession – has led us to consider only that part of the Western front which is held by ourselves, and partly because of this and partly from other causes the tendency for the whole line from Nieuport to Trieste to be cut up into three sections – British, French, Italian – has become more and more accentuated.[138]

This was noticeable in the latest status reports from Haig and Robertson 'although the latter very wisely remarks that "the British Army alone cannot with the war. Our allies must be made to fight".'[139]

[136] CAB 27/8, WP 61, p. 12.
[137] Ibid., p. 12.
[138] Ibid., p. 6.
[139] Ibid., pp. 6-7.

Inter-Allied co-ordination was also vital to improve war materiel production. Wilson asked if the Allies could increase output so that 'we shall be able to overwhelm the enemy?'[140] He believed they could, but on two conditions:

> (a) That there is absolute co-ordination between the four countries of England, France and Italy and in future America.
> (b) That the whole of our united energies are concentrated on this one work, and that the date of the attempt to reach a "final decision" is made subordinate to the completion of this great effort. [141]

In other words, in Wilson's strategic analysis, Allied co-operation and co-ordination was fundamental if victory was to be snatched from the jaws of defeat. Without decisive action, the prospects for this essential co-working were gloomy:

> It seems to me that there is less concerted action now in our strategy and in our various plans than at any time since the war began. I do not wish to exaggerate, but human nature being what it is and our Commanders-in-Chiefs and Chiefs of Staff being what they are – all men of strong and decided views, all men whose whole energies are devoted to their own fronts and their own national concerns – we get as a natural and inevitable result a war conducted not as a whole but as a war on sections of the whole.[142]

Consequently, there was 'a war on the British front', one on the French and one on the Italian 'and the stronger and the better the various Chiefs the more isolated and detached the plans'.[143]

This was the core of Wilson's strategic argument. 'All this confusion, overlapping and loss of collective effort' was inevitable and 'the better the sectional Commanders-in-Chiefs are, the more loyal and responsive the

[140] CAB 27/8, WP 61, p. 11.
[141] Ibid., original emphasis.
[142] Ibid., p. 12.
[143] Ibid.

Chiefs of the Home Staffs, the more we see the whole of the national effort restricted to the national fronts.' Lack of concerted, effective, oversight was 'undoubtedly prolonging the war to an unnecessary and even to a dangerous extent.'[144] He summed up thus: 'The net results seems to me to be that we take short views instead of long views, we look for decisions today instead of laying our plans for tomorrow and as [con]sequence we have constant change of plans, with growing and increasing irritation and inefficiency.'[145] The time had come for the establishment of 'an intelligent, effective and powerful superior direction'.[146] This would result from the creation of a small 'War Cabinet of the Allies informed and above all entrusted with such power that opinion on all the larger issues of the war will carry weight of conviction and be accepted by each of the Allies as final.'[147] Deploying all his political subtlety, Wilson reassured the politicians that there was 'no question' of overruling national Cabinets since the 'Supreme War Cabinet, or Superior Direction as I have called it' would represent them. He also attempted, unsuccessfully, to reassure the generals that there was not 'the least danger of any interference with the soldiers in the field, since the Chiefs of the Staff in each country will remain as today'.[148] This new body would look beyond the narrow confines of sectional fronts and treat the line of battle 'from Nieuport to Mesopotamia as one line, and it would allot to each of the Allies the part which it would play'. According to Wilson, if such a body had been in place

[144] CAB 27/8 WP 61, p. 13.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid., p 14.

a year or two earlier it would have arbitrated on whether the Allies should have sought a 'final decision' on the Western Front 'or whether the time for such an attempt should be postponed until a favourable decision had been reached in some of the minor theatres, thus enabling a larger force to be concentrated at a later date for the death-grapple in the West'.[149]

Wilson's grand vision was that his 'Superior Direction' would define the 'broad line of action' for the next one or two years and decide 'when and under what conditions and in which part of the main theatre the final decision should be attempted and reached'.[150] With this body in place the 'vexed question' of taking over more line from the French could be addressed. Thanks to the current state of strategic decision making, without agreed plans for the future, this was impossible. If Wilson's mechanism was adopted it would be 'quite easy' to solve 'when the broad lines of next year's campaign have been arranged'. It would lay out broad policies for a joint air campaign and adjust war material manufacture accordingly. In short this body would take over the 'Superior Direction' of the war 'a thing that has not yet been done, and for the lack of which we have suffered so grievously in the past and without which we shall, so certainly, suffer even more in the future'.[151] Without such a body each ally would continue to concentrate on 'his own war, each thus drifting further and further from his neighbour, while all the time the enemy, under one

[149] CAB 27/8, WP 61, p. 14.
[150] Ibid., p. 14.
[151] Ibid., p. 15.

governing authority, will be able to concentrate and to defeat each of the local efforts.'

As for the naysayers:

> I may be told that, excellent as such an idea is in theory, it is wholly impossible in practice; that we are already overloaded with machinery; that if we cannot come to decisions under the present conditions, then we certainly cannot under any others; that there are no men fitted by knowledge, temperament or position to fill the new posts, and so on and so on. My answer would be very simple. I admit the difficulties but I deny the impossibilities. Further, we have tried every other conceivable variant and always with the same unsatisfactory result – in short, if we cannot make up our minds to catch a hold of the situation as a whole and really direct and command the main issue of this war, we are gambling with the future in a manner we have no right to do, and we are in fact running a very serious chance of losing the war by stalemate.
>
> We (the Allies) hold all the cards in our hands – men, munitions, guns, aeroplanes, food, money and the High Seas – there remains only the question of how to play them and when to play them, and my absolute conviction is that there is no other way than by the creation of a Superior Direction.[152]

FRENCH'S PAPER

Field Marshal Lord French's paper has received limited critical attention in the historiography. It has been largely passed over, dismissed as partisan and invective-ridden and by implication of little merit. Haig described it as 'a poor production' and 'evidently the outcome of a jealous and disappointed mind'.[153] It is true that it was more personal in tone than Wilson's, and critical of both Haig and Robertson, but this does not justify it being overlooked. In fact, study reveals a clarity of argument which, while more strident in tone than the usual public discourse of senior

[152] CAB 27/8, WP 61, P. 15.
[153] NLS, Haig papers, Haig (manuscript) diary, Acc.3155/97, 31 October 1917.

military figures of the time, in several ways echoed Wilson's own line of argument. Historians have noted that French's paper, as originally submitted to Hankey, required editing by the Cabinet Secretary and Wilson before it was considered suitable for War Cabinet consumption.[154] Until now, French's first draft and his final submission have not been compared in detail. This section will attempt to fill this gap in the historiography.

Wilson delivered the finished reports to Hankey. According to the latter's diary, the papers should have gone in the first instance to Robertson as CIGS, a fact Hankey had failed to record in the relevant minutes. French objected, Lloyd George refused to rule on the matter and the documents went first to the Cabinet Secretary. Eventually Hankey passed them to Derby:

> The whole subject is so thorny and Robertson is in so prickly a state that I did not wish to make any mistake in procedure... The reports confirmed my worst anticipations. They both recommended a central council including a staff of generals, in Paris, to be independent of the national General Staffs. This, alone, is enough to drive Robertson into resignation. They both condemned the continuation of the Flanders offensive, next year, which is the course what Robertson and Haig recommend. In addition, Lord French's report hits out hard at Robertson and Haig whose views were challenged in principle and in detail.

Hankey then added, but perhaps understandably omitted from his memoirs:

> Incidentally I may remark that the whole thing is a clever plot on Ll G's part. Earlier in the year at Litchfield he sounded them both and ascertained this was their view, no doubt playing on their ambition

[154] See esp. Roskill, *Hankey,* p. 446, Jeffery, *Wilson*, p. 206, Holmes, *Little Field Marshal*, p. 332.

> and known jealousy and dislike of Robertson, by letting them see that he agreed, accompanying this no doubt with a good deal of suggestions. Then he lets Haig go on, and even encourages him to do so, knowing that the bad weather was preventing a big result, in order to strengthen the argument. Then he guilelessly proposes the War Council, knowing perfectly well that the jury is a packed one, which will only report in one direction. By these means he fortifies himself with apparently unbiased military opinion in the great struggle with Robertson and Haig, which he knows he cannot face without it.[155]

Wilson saw Derby on 24 October: 'He told me he had not yet shown our Papers (Johnnie's and mine) to Robertson. He said Johnnie's was too personal and mine too unanswerable and if they were shown to Haig and Robertson there would be a hell of a row which might mean resignation of Haig, R. and himself!'[156] At this point the Prime Minister ordered French to tone down his paper.[157]

His most recent biographer ascribed French's combatative mood not only to his animosity towards both Robertson and Haig but also to his 'increasingly gloomy outlook on the war in general'.[158] Unlike Wilson's diplomatic approach, his report overtly echoed the criticisms the Prime Minister recently deployed against his C-in-C and CIGS when they met on October 5:

> LG said Robertson simply "thwarted" him in every scheme... I asked LG about a superior organisation & he said of course that was the best plan but the French (and Italian) governments were absolutely rotten – in fact there were no governments – & so it was impossible to get such an organisation started; & therefore he was reverting to his former idea of calling me in to examine Robertson's plans. Johnnie fulminated against R[obertson], & LG agreed but said that

[155] CAC, Hankey diary, HNKY 1/3, 20 October 1917, and Hankey, *Supreme Command*, (vol. II), pp. 714-715.
[156] Wilson diary, 24 October 1917.
[157] CAC, Hankey diary, 24 October 1917.
[158] Holmes, *Little Field Marshal*, p. 332.

> R had got so much of the Press (M[orning] Post, Northcliffe, Leo Maxse etc) & Asquith that it was a difficult question to remove him… Johnnie said he felt very hopeless about the whole thing, for although LG knew that Robertson was not big enough for the post yet he funked kicking him out…the fact is that LG is profoundly dissatisfied (as he was on Aug 23rd) but does not know what to do, or how to get rid of Robertson. I saw no animus against Haig.[159]

The main thrust of Haig's proposal, according to French, was for the War Cabinet to accept that Britain could be successful on the Western Front in 1918, and that it would be so. Such a belief had obtained since 1 July 1916 and the results were clear. Haig had assured the Cabinet, the public and his troops 'that he could break the enemy's line in such a manner as to pour large bodies of cavalry through the gap he had made and compel a great German defeat.' Despite bringing 'masses' of cavalry 'up to points close to the trenches, at considerable loss in men and horses, in this expectation' this had not happened. Wilson struck the accusatory words 'at considerable loss in men and horses' from the original draft.[160] French admired Haig's 'magnificent efforts' but 'the results so far obtained have not only fallen far below expectations, amounting almost to promises, of the Commander-in-Chief, but have in fact brought us but little nearer to any effective decision.' Haig was now asking the War Cabinet 'to accept his assurance that he can overthrow the enemy in the field and compass the German defeat next year. But such appeals [at this point Wilson struck out the words "for confidence and trust in his judgement" from French's

[159] Wilson diary, 5 October 1917.
[160] IWM, French papers, JDPF 7/7, draft of Lord French's paper on the 'Present State of the War, future prospects, and future action,' 20 October 1917, (in its final version CAB 27/8, WP 60), (amendments to the original in Wilson's handwriting), p. 12.

draft][161] have been made on many previous occasions, with the results to which I have referred.'[162]

French was also unconvinced by Haig's suggestion that decisive action on the Western Front had a positive impact in the countries of the Middle East where Britain's Imperial interests lay. Inserting a self-congratulatory reference, he said he imagined that:

> India and the East took more interest in the capture of Baghdad than all the battles on the Western front after the first definite set-back of Germany in September 1914, which was a thing they could understand…fighting battles on the Western front to impress the East, or even to impress the German people, is not a good military reason...[163]

As for comparative manpower numbers, he asked 'on what basis' Haig could claim that 132 German divisions had been severely weakened by recent action. British units had also suffered set-backs, and had not 'many, if not all, of them gone on again and succeeded?'[164] French critiqued GHQ's assessment of Germans losses between 1 October 1917 and the end of the year. These had been put at 720,000, he said, 'surely this is too much to hope for!'[165] Having reviewed the figures with both Macdonogh and Macready he did not believe Haig was justified in suggesting the Allies would have a numerical advantage on the Western front in 1918: 'The arguments used are the same as those brought forward early in 1916, and

[161] IWM, French papers, JDPF 7/7, p. 12.
[162] CAB 27/8, WP 60, pp. 11-12.
[163] Ibid., p. 4.
[164] Ibid., pp. 4-5; in fact, Haig's paper said 135 divisions had been weakened, CAB 27/8, GT 2243, p. 4.
[165] Ibid., p. 6.

that these have not been borne out ["falsified" in the original draft] [166] by the actual test of battle between July 1st 1916 and October 1917.' Furthermore, there was no evidence to show that the 132 German divisions had been 'broken by their losses' and the forecast for the enemy's 'wastage' by the start of 1918 were 'inaccurate' and the conclusions arrived at 'unwarranted'.[167]

French considered GHQ's assertion that during Third Ypres the Germans had suffered 50% more casualties than the British. Macdonogh, however, had told him that the Germans had not issued any casualty figures since July: 'In view of the fact that we have almost invariably been attacking, I find it very difficult to believe that our enemy's losses have not been greatly overrated.'[168] French had initially written 'greatly exaggerated', but Wilson inserted a milder verb.[169] He concluded that he did not believe Haig had 'inflicted any greater loss upon the enemy than he has suffered himself'.[170] His report showed that British casualties for the period 1 July 1916 to 9 April 1917 were 'nearly' 53,103 per month; casualties in the succeeding period [the period which included the Battles of Arras and the ongoing Third Ypres] were 'nearly' 83,318 per month. These figures were 'certainly a surprise to me in view of frequent reports that our casualties during 1917 were "increasingly light"'. [171] Since the start of the Somme battle Haig's armies had incurred more than one million casualties and

[166] IWM, French papers, JDPF 7/7, p. 7.
[167] CAB 27/8, WP 60, p. 7.
[168] Ibid., p. 8.
[169] IWM, French papers, JDPF 7/7, p. 8.
[170] CAB 27/8, WP 60, p. 18.
[171] Ibid., p. 10.

recovered 200 square miles of French and Belgian territory, out of 13,500 square miles of occupied territory facing them.[172]

French said he entertained 'very grave doubts as to whether we have not been playing the German game throughout the whole of our operations in the last year and a half.' In a paragraph which must have been music to the ears of Lloyd George he added:

> It is quite open to question whether they have not deliberately led us on to the capture of ground which is, in the long run, of little military importance to them, and which they know they never want to keep, even if they could. It is by no means unlikely that their object throughout has been to hold on to the Western side, and to do so in such a manner as to invite our attack and impose enormous casualties upon us, with a minimum loss to themselves.[173]

In sum, the amendments Wilson made to French's critique of Haig's work were significant but limited, and for the most part involved substituting intemperate words with more sensitive ones.

French took a stronger line with Robertson's paper, condemning it as 'chiefly a form of special pleading in favour of continuing the offensive in the West.'[174] Wilson rewrote the sentence so that it described Robertson's paper as one 'devoted to advocating to a continuance of' the Ypres offensive.[175] French questioned the CIGS' warning against 'gambles' in the Middle East. He opposed another offensive in the west as 'much more of a "gamble" than anything we have undertaken in the war.' This method

[172] CAB 27/8, WP 60, p. 12.
[173] Ibid., p. 14.
[174] IWM, French papers, JDPF 7/7, p. 17.
[175] CAB 27/8, WP 60, p. 17.

had been tried already with 'enormous loss and produced comparatively little result.'[176] Robertson said he had considered an offensive in the east for months, ultimately rejecting the idea.[177] French said he believed such a strategy 'offered such favourable chances and possibilities as should have induced the General Staff to bring it up for discussion by the War Cabinet at a time when it would have been possible to consider it.'[178] In the draft, the sentence continued 'namely, some three months ago' again, Wilson crossed this out.[179]

French took Robertson to task for his criticism of the Nivelle Offensive as 'somewhat severe' and 'misleading'. Nivelle had captured important military features and made 'as long if not longer advance than we have yet accomplished in the Ypres area'. According to French 'A feeling of resentment against our French Allies is somewhat apparent in the mind of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff,' and 'I cannot help regarding these remarks as somewhat severe.'[180] Wilson's diplomatic pen was employed once again to strike out French's addition of the words 'and without justification'.[181] Robertson's conviction that the Allies could 'beat the Germans every time we fight them' and inflict heavier losses was, according to French 'not altogether consistent with the facts'.[182] Wilson toned this down, replacing these words with 'somewhat optimistic'.[183]

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[176] CAB 27/8, WP 60, p. 16.
[177] CAB 27/8, GT 2242, 'Future Military Policy', CIGS to War Cabinet, 9 October 1917, p. 4.
[178] CAB 27/8, WP 60, p. 16.
[179] IWM, French papers, JDPF 7/7, p. 16.
[180] CAB 27/8, WP 60, pp. 17.
[181] IWM, French papers, JDPF 7/7, p. 17.
[182] CAB 27/8, GT 2242, 9 October 1917, p. 3, and French papers, JDPF 7/7, p. 18.
[183] CAB 27/8, WP 60, pp. 18.

French believed that Haig's confidence in himself and his troops had 'somewhat warped his judgement'. Moreover, the General Staff had failed in its primary responsibility of putting all the C-in-C's assumptions to 'the most crucial test.' In other words, Robertson had acquiesced in the face of Haig's enthusiastic self-confidence 'without question or demur'. French claimed that 'statements from the front have not been tested as to their accuracy'. [184] As if this slur on Robertson's professionalism was not enough, French claimed that: 'Wild statements have been allowed to pass unchallenged. They have apparently been blindly accepted.' Wilson crossed this out.[185] French concluded this section with praise for the 'splendid work' of the Army but which had 'led to no strategic result, and our limited resources in man-power will not allow us to reach a strategic end by tactical slogging alone.'[186]

French rejected the first two of Lloyd George's strategic options - total or partial concentration on the Western Front. A successful offensive capable of breaking down the enemy's morale was impossible unless and until sufficient American forces arrived to make a significant difference, something he did not expect until 1919. British strength was 'being gradually sapped by the enemy in indecisive attacks which attain inadequate results and entail undue loss'.[187] As for option four, an offensive in the Middle East, French took a similar view to Wilson. He liked

[184] CAB 27/8, WP 60, pp. 19-20.
[185] IWM, French papers, JDPF 7/7, pp. 19-20.
[186] CAB 27/8, WP 60, p. 21.
[187] Ibid., pp. 22-23.

the idea in principle, but the window of opportunity had closed.[188] As a result, only option 3 was appropriate, the 'Pétain policy' of standing on the defensive until the Allies could recover and align themselves with a sufficiently large American force. This would mean the BEF would have to take over more French line, but he expected a compromise could be agreed. French backed Wilson's recommendation for a 'Superior War Council' to 'appreciate the general situation and to formulate plans'.[189]

CONCLUSION

In the autumn of 1917 Wilson finally found himself in a position where politicians, led by the Prime Minister, wanted to hear his views. This was a novel situation; for most of the war his interaction with his political friends can be summed up as much talk, full of fury, but signifying very little. Lloyd George needed a senior soldier prepared to look critically at how Britain's military leadership was fighting the war. Wilson was under-employed, in London and desperate to play his part. Haig and Robertson, the leading advocates of British policy on the Western Front appeared devoid of ideas and for 1918 had little to offer strategically than more of the same. Wilson was in the right place at the right time, but he was no dupe. His seminal document offered the politicians an opportunity to regain control of military strategy, and an overarching inter-Allied body tasked with making key decisions had been a Wilson ambition for at least two years. The result, as the next chapter will discuss, was the creation of the SWC at Versailles.

[188] CAB 27/8, WP 60, p. 23.
[189] Ibid., pp. 25-26.

For both Lloyd George and Wilson its establishment was not the end of the process for revising Allied military strategy, but the beginning.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SUPREME WAR COUNCIL

The SWC, the direct result of Wilson's strategy paper discussed in the previous chapter, was officially constituted at a meeting of Allied leaders in Rapallo, Italy, on 7 November 1917. Wilson was appointed as Britain's Permanent Military Representative (PMR) to work with his Allied opposite numbers in what was effectively an inter-Allied general staff. Lloyd George, having successfully sought military advice from outside the War Office, was determined to formalise the principle. He and Wilson had secured French support for some form of superior direction of war strategy, a long-held priority for the latter. As this chapter shows, Wilson and his Prime Minister did not have things all their own way. Robertson and the War Office machine conducted a 'rearguard action' to stymie the influence of the PMRs, and by extension the Council itself. The historiography agrees that Lloyd George's main purpose in establishing the SWC was to weaken the stranglehold he felt his generals, specifically Robertson and Haig, held over British war strategy by ultimately removing either man, or both.[1] Robertson took a sinister view of the Prime Minister's motives. Referring to the recent overthrow of the moderate 'Provisional' government in Russia by revolutionary Bolsheviks, he condemned Wilson's secretariat at Versailles as 'the new Soviet'.[2] Hankey's biographer took a different view. While there was 'an element of truth' in

[1] See, for example, Woodward, *Lloyd George*, p. 221; idem, *Robertson*, p. 191; French, *Strategy*, p. 164.
[2] LHCMA, Robertson papers, Robertson to Haig, (7/7/66), 15 November 1917; Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution* (London: Bodley Head, 2017 [1996]), pp. 191, 484-6.

Robertson's fears 'it is equally certain that it was not the Prime Minister's only, or indeed his main purpose – which was, quite simply, to establish a centralised and coordinated system of strategic direction.'[3] While this is an overly-generous interpretation of Lloyd George's motives, this chapter argues that it could fairly be applied to those of Wilson. His diary entries for 1917 contain references to his belief in the need for a move from independent national commands towards a more coordinated and co-operative Allied strategy; one the British might shape and eventually dominate. While the downfall of Haig and Robertson might have been Lloyd George's ultimate aim, there is no evidence in Wilson's diary for this year, nor in his correspondence, of a desire to see Haig removed. In fact, Wilson supported Haig's retention as C-in-C, only reluctantly concluding that he be replaced in mid-1918.[4] As for Robertson, Wilson was critical of his strategic judgement and appears to have concluded that, as his authority as PMR grew, Wully's would decline. At that point, professional criticism evolved into personal animosity, but Wilson's priority remained that of establishing 'superior control' of war policy.

Wilson attempted to formalise this 'superior control' by using the SWC to take hold of the strategic debate. Despite initial setbacks, in three months Wilson and his colleagues produced 14 'Joint Notes', or position papers, covering a range of strategic issues with several more soon after.[5] While some of the more contentious of these documents have received attention

[3] Roskill, *Hankey*, p. 454.
[4] See p. 245.
[5] Wilson started work at Versailles on 19 November 1917 and became CIGS on 18 February 1918; Wilson diary, November 1917-February 1918.

in the historiography, the range of the subjects deserves further study, illustrating as they do Wilson's breadth of view.[6] In addition, the SWC secretariat during Wilson's tenure and its aftermath, produced a range of other policy documents which illuminate key aspects of British strategic thinking. Greenhalgh dismissed the Council as 'nothing more than a sounding board or talking shop'.[7] This study favours Jeffery's description of the creation of the SWC as 'an extremely important advance in the co-ordination of Allied policy- and decision-making'.[8] The Joint Notes (JNs) embodied Wilson's long-held strategic views, many of which received their first official scrutiny in his paper of 20 October 1917.[9] JNs 1 and 12 built on this and ended Haig's hopes for another offensive in Flanders in 1918.

CREATION OF THE SWC

The day after Wilson drew his outline for an inter-Allied council on the back of a Ritz Hotel menu card, his admiring Gallic audience of the French Premier Painlevé, Propaganda Minister Franklin-Bouillon and Foch, visited Lloyd George. He floated the notion of supplementing meetings of heads of Allied governments by 'the establishment of a Permanent Staff of military officers who would study the war as a whole and give the several governments their views as to the strategy which should be adopted'. The 'defect of the system hitherto pursued had been that each General was interested mainly in his own front'. As a result, when C-in-Cs met they 'did not draw up a plan in which the war was treated as a whole but they each

[6] See esp. Jeffery, *Wilson*, pp. 211-113, and French, *Strategy*, pp. 189-90.
[7] Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Victory Through Coalition*, p. 174.
[8] Jeffery, *Wilson*, p. 216.
[9] CAB 27/8, WP 61.

approved each other's plans…This, however, was not a real co-operation such as was needed to ensure victory.'[10] Hankey was 'horrified' by Lloyd George's suggestion, 'I had no time to warn the PM that in Robertson's bruised and suspicious frame of mind' he would see the move as a proposal to 'upset his authority and may resign. When I warned him of this afterwards he was astounded, and hardly credited it! Why is he so blind, sometimes?'[11] Whether Lloyd George was blind or not, Franklin-Bouillon welcomed the suggestion and thought 'the Staff ought to be constituted this very week'.[12] The Prime Minister had obtained the French support he needed, a week before Wilson and French submitted their policy papers. One of the unresolved questions was for the BEF to take over 100 kilometres of front from the French. Thus, Wilson and Lloyd George secured French support for the SWC by making an extension dependent on an assessment by the body they were proposing to establish. For the present Lloyd George stressed the negative impact an extension would have on British effectiveness and morale, and suggested Haig and Pétain conferred on options.[13]

Wilson had been busy promoting his 'big idea' amongst his friends and supporters. Before submitting his policy paper, he had tried to convince his ally Lord Milner that his proposed inter-Allied staff was the mechanism for curbing the obsession the politicians felt some generals had for large-

[10] TNA, CAB 28/2, War Cabinet, IC (Allied Conferences), Volume II, IC 28, 'Secretary's notes of a conversation at Chequers Court,' 14 October 1917.
[11] CAC, Hankey diary, HNKY 1/3, 14 October 1917.
[12] TNA, CAB 28/2, IC 28, 14 October 1917.
[13] Ibid.

scale and costly offensives in the west.[14] Milner 'seemed as determined as LG to stop any more of these attempts at final decisions by Haig and he was just as dissatisfied with Robertson, and he is no longer afraid that if Robertson resigned the Government would fall. He was all for "the fellow going and be hanged to him".'[15] The two met again the next day once Milner had read both papers:

> "At last" he said "the tyranny is over" and he was looking forward to the end of the "reign of terror"! It seems to me there will be a holy row over all this, and of course the frock coats will quote Johnnie and me against Haig and Robertson. We must avoid this as much as possible. It is the system and machinery I am aiming at and not the man.[16]

With the benefit of hindsight *vis-a-vis* Robertson this seems a particularly disingenuous remark, but Wilson's diary for the period, while critical of his military policy displays little outright personal animus towards the CIGS. That changed once it became clear Robertson and his supporters would not easily accept the new policy machinery. On 23 October, the diehard Tory *Morning Post* carried a leader 'about Cabinet interfering with Haig and Robertson'. Wilson, suspecting Robertson, told the editor H.A. Gwynne that:

> I thought he was barking up the wrong tree, that LG had - so far <u>not</u> interfered with Robertson - that, in my opinion the machinery was at fault and until we got a superior body we should never have unified action, and so on. … We will see in the next few days whether I made any impression.[17]

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[14] A.M. Gollin, *Proconsul in Politics: A study of Lord Milner in Opposition and in Power* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 454-5.
[15] Wilson diary,18 October 1917.
[16] Ibid., 19 October 1917.
[17] Ibid., 23 October 1917.

A few days later Wilson saw Milner again. He was 'in one of his pessimistic moods…He saw insurmountable difficulties to my proposal for a Superior Direction! He said that I was the only possible soldier to put there but great difficulties in that!...Milner did not know what LG proposed to do [regarding Wilson's future strategy paper].'[18] Milner was not only pessimistic about Wilson's prospects. Two days earlier Austro-German forces began a major offensive in Italy, the Battle of Caporetto, 'the most disastrous reverse suffered by Italy in the First World War'.[19] Robertson and then Wilson were shuttled off to Italy to assess the damage and advise on an Allied response. The set-back strengthened Wilson's hand in his argument for coordinated strategic planning. On 27 October, he recorded that the French had decided to send four divisions to Italy, the British would play second-fiddle by sending only two: 'So again we are governed by Haig and R[obertson]. If anything was needed to prove the necessity of my "Superior Direction" we have it here.'[20]

On 30 October Lloyd George warned the Cabinet that Painlevé was again demanding the British to take over more line. Before a decision could be taken, he wanted a review of options for 1918. Lloyd George felt 'we were being out-manoeuvred and beaten by an enemy who was inferior in material and personnel…every year the enemy succeeded in ending up [sic] his campaign with a great success.'[21] The setbacks in Italy were 'due

[18] Wilson diary, 26 October 1917.
[19] George H. Cassar, *The Forgotten Front: The British Campaign in Italy, 1917-1918* (London: Hambledon Press, 1998), p. 65.
[20] Wilson diary, 27 October 1917.
[21] TNA, CAB 23/13/27, War Cabinet, 30 October 1917, (draft), p1.

to the fact that the [strategic] situation was never considered as a whole. The Conferences we had with our Allies, which had lately increased in number, were not really Conferences. They were only meetings of people with preconceived ideas who desired to find a formula which would reconcile them.' He therefore felt that Wilson's advice for an 'Inter-Allied Staff' was 'sound'. Its functions would not be to give orders:

> No government could concede the right to issue orders, but their duties would be to examine the military situation of the Allies…No one was thinking out the whole plan as though he were responsible for the whole battle-front of the Allies. In order to achieve success the War ought to be conducted as though there were one man sitting in the centre with equal responsibility for all fronts.[22]

Lloyd George outlined the structure and function of what was soon to become the permanent military staff of the SWC, and that of the Council itself. What was needed was 'for the first time, a real Inter-Allied General Staff, to examine the situation as a whole and to advise, without divesting the Government or General Staffs of their responsibility.' Stressing the body's advisory status, he said it would receive plans from the Allied commands and then 'suggest' what action should be taken.

> It was essential that this Inter-Allied General Staff should be an entirely independent body, not consisting of representatives of the National General Staffs, as in that case each representative would simply fight for the views of his own General Staff.[23]

The Cabinet debate centred on the role and powers of the permanent 'Inter-Allied General Staff' which 'would make a continuous study of the Allied War plans, just as the General Staff of the War Office made a

[22] TNA, CAB 23/13/27, War Cabinet, 30 October 1917, (draft), p2.
[23] Ibid., pp. 2-3.

continuous study of our own military plans.' The draft minutes recorded 'It was pointed out that this was a change which might, to some extent, diminish the authority of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, but it was suggested that in practice it would not do so very materially.' This sentence was later crossed out by Hankey along with a subsequent one concerning the sensitivities of Robertson and his War Office colleagues:

> Some doubts were expressed as to whether ~~the scheme could be carried out without friction with the present Military Advisers of the Government, and as to whether in practical working this scheme would not involve great friction, and as to whether~~ the new machinery would, in fact, cure the evils mentioned by the Prime Minister.[24]

A key question for the new body would be 'the nature of the offensives for next year, and whether the main effort of the Allies was to be made in 1918 or 1919.'[25] It was agreed that the Prime Minister would write to his French counterpart proposing the establishment of the SWC. Such a body was essential because after three years of war 'the German Government is still militarily triumphant.' Furthermore:

> As compared with the enemy the fundamental weakness of the Allies is that the direction of their military operations lacks real unity…There has never been an Allied body which had the knowledge of the resources of all the Allies, which could prepare a single co-ordinated plan for utilising those resources in the most decisive manner taking into account the political, and diplomatic, as well as the military weaknesses of the Central Powers.

As for taking over more French line, there was no point in discussing this until the campaign for 1918 was agreed and this was 'exactly the sort of

[24] TNA, CAB 23/13/27, War Cabinet, 30 October 1917, (draft), original deletion as indicated, pp. 4-5.
[25] Ibid., p. 5.

question which would be referred to the Allied Council'. [26] Wilson saw Amery and 'pushed into him the absolute necessity of a Superior Direction which if properly handled would give us a dominating influence in all plans. He came to see me before dinner to tell me he had seen Milner and he thought Milner was now convinced of the necessity.' That evening he recruited Winston Churchill, then Minister of Munitions, to his cause:

> Had a long chat with Winston. He is enthusiastically in favour of my paper and has written a whole paper – which he sent me – on the par[agraph] in my paper where I urge the enormous increase in materiel – guns, aeroplanes, tanks, railways etc. … Winston is quite clear that we must have a Superior Direction. He tells me that LG thinks this also but is afraid to take the plunge because of the opposition of Haig, Robertson and Asquith. I told Winston that I did not for a moment think that Squiff would take up the challenge for one moment if LG put his case properly, for neither Haig nor Robertson would have a leg to stand on. …I quoted also my example of the different strategies – ours and the Boches
>
> 1. We take Bullecourt, they take Roumania
> 2. We take Messines, they take Russia
> 3. We don't take Pachendaal [sic], they take Italy[27]

This was one of Wilson's favourite lines of argument, the one which had, he told Esher, persuaded Lloyd George to back his new scheme.[28] Lloyd George and Painlevé agreed to set up the SWC, with the issue of the BEF taking over more line to await advice from the PMRs.[29] The War Cabinet agreed a constitution for the SWC and the terms under which Britain's PMR would work. It is hard to disagree with Woodward's conclusion that the Prime Minister had 'cleverly' manoeuvred Major-General Sir Frederick Maurice, Robertson's DMO, into this invidious task while Wully was visiting

[26] TNA, CAB 23/13/27, Appendix to War Cabinet minutes, 30 October 1917, (draft), 'Letter from Lloyd George to M Painlevé'.
[27] Wilson diary, 30 October 1917.
[28] CAC, Esher journal, (ESHR 2/20), 4 November 1917.
[29] TNA, CAB 23/13/28, War Cabinet, 31 October 1917.

the Italian front.[30] Article 4 of the draft said the PMRs would receive proposals for future plans from their general staffs and 'in consultation' would then produce a 'coordinated statement of those plans together with proposals for the combined action of the Allies.' The next sentence confirmed Wilson's future as a driving force in British strategic planning: 'Should the plans received from the Chiefs of General Staffs not be, in the opinion of the military representatives, the best for ensuring such combined action it will be within their functions to suggest other proposals.'[31] In an illustration of how closely the two were working together Lloyd George had shown Wilson the draft the night before:

> He [the PMR] is not to be on the council because Robertson is not on the War Cabinet. All plans to be submitted to him by CIGS, and he has the power to alter, or even to make fresh plans without reference to the CIGS. I asked this particularly for it was in a formal note in Maurice's handwriting at the dictation of LG! The Mil[itary] Member can call for any and all information, and on the whole I was satisfied with the proposals.[32]

When the War Cabinet met on 2 November 1917, Lieutenant-General Wilson was formally confirmed as the British representative on the 'Permanent Inter-Allied Advisory General Staff' of the 'Supreme Inter-Allied Council' (the working title of the SWC). He was to hold the temporary rank of General and Derby, as Secretary of State for War, was instructed to help Wilson set up his staff.[33] The insertion of the word 'Advisory' into the title of this new 'General Staff' served as a fig leaf to Lloyd George's assertion that the initiative did not erode the authority of

[30] Woodward, *Lloyd George*, p. 213.
[31] TNA, CAB 23/4/36, War Cabinet, minutes and Appendix III, 1 November 1917.
[32] Wilson diary, 31 October 1917; CAC, Hankey diary, HNKY 1/3, 31 October, 1 November 1917.
[33] TNA, CAB 23/4/37, War Cabinet, 2 November 1917.

the Robertson-dominated Imperial General Staff at the War Office. At the previous two War Cabinet meetings, Derby had tried to stymie progress, firstly by asking for more time for the military leadership to consider the issue and then by asserting that the Maurice 'constitution' had been drawn up at short notice and that 'in the circumstances it would not represent considered military opinion. It was for discussion only.'[34] Derby eventually bowed to the inevitable and 'expressed his approval' of Wilson's appointment.[35] Wilson recorded in his diary: 'I went then to see Derby who is in the devil of a funk of what Robertson will say, and he (Derby) thinks he may have to resign.'[36]

Wilson pressed home his belief that current strategy, comprising large-scale offensives on the Western Front, carried out by national armies with minimal Allied co-operation, would not bring victory. After seeing Derby, he met Haig's Chief of Staff Kiggell: 'He pleaded that in another 8 days D[ouglas] H[aig] could take enough of the Paschendaal Ridge to make himself secure for the winter and that this operation ought not to be stopped.' Kiggell, enunciating GHQ's anxiety over manpower and in an oblique reference to the upcoming Battle of Cambrai, confided that Haig:

> …had another secret operation in view which promised most satisfactory results provided no more troops were sent to Italy. Kigg said the Boches had skinned the whole front in a manner they had never done before and that therefore this was a great chance. I could not help saying that if this was so ie the skinning, then all our attacks had had a very disappointing result as they had not saved Russia nor Italy nor prevented the Boches weakening the front in face of us! Kigg found this difficult to answer.[37]

[34] TNA, CAB, 23/13/27 and 23/13/28, War Cabinet, 30 October and 31 October 1917.
[35] TNA, CAB 23/4/37, War Cabinet, 2 November 1917.
[36] Wilson diary, 2 November 1917.
[37] Ibid.

In the historiography, Robertson at this stage in the war is painted as a hapless, even helpless, victim of the cunning and mendacious Lloyd George, ably assisted by the wily Wilson. According to Woodward: 'Lloyd George marched under the banner of unity of command, but his primary objective was to diminish Robertson's influence over future British strategy.'[38] While this is clearly the case, the CIGS, with some support from Haig, fought a rearguard action aimed if not at derailing the SWC, certainly limiting the powers of the PMRs. Robertson received the terms of reference for the new organisation while touring the Italian front.[39] He asked Haig what he thought of 'the new Allied Council System & of our representative. It has all happened in my absence, & I think Derby has let the Army down badly, as I shall tell him.'[40] Lloyd George asked Haig for his views of the SWC:

> I told him that the proposal had been considered for three years and each time had been rejected as unworkable. I gave several reasons why I thought it could not work, and that it would add to our difficulties having such a body. The PM then said that the two Governments had decided to form it; so I said, there is no need to say any more then![41]

Haig's willingness to accept the rulings of his political masters, regardless of his personal views, was one reason why he prospered both before and during the war, especially at times when his position was under critical scrutiny. By contrast Robertson was unwilling to stay silent; he thought the

[38] Woodward, *MCWR*, p. 245.
[39] LHCMA, Robertson Papers, 'Foreign Office telegrams to Robertson', (4/8/2-3), November 1917.
[40] Haig to Robertson, 4 November 1917, in *MCWR*, p. 251.
[41] NLS, Haig papers, Haig (manuscript) diary, Acc.3155/97, 4 November 1917.

government was wrong and that its actions would lead to confusion about where military authority lay, leading to defeat. When the Allied leaders met at Rapallo, Robertson submitted an amended version of Lloyd George's scheme which Wilson had accepted on 1 November. Article 4, the crucial paragraph which gave Wilson and his colleagues power to over-rule the General Staffs, had been reworded, and toned down, by Lloyd George:

> (4) The general war plans drawn up by the competent Military Authorities of the Allied countries are submitted to the Supreme War Council which, under the high authority of the Governments, ensures their concordance. If the plans submitted to the Supreme War Council do not appear to them to be the best for ensuring combined action, it will be within their functions to recommend other proposals.[42]

Although the wording was more diplomatic than in Maurice's original, Robertson was not mollified. He submitted an alternative, striking out the second sentence and replacing it with: '…and submits if needed any necessary changes.'[43] This minor alteration made little difference to the overall tenor of the clause, and the Prime Minister accepted it.[44] Henceforth the plans of the General Staffs would have to be submitted to the SWC (and thus its PMRs) for approval and/or amendment. Robertson 'persisted in his opposition to the last', Hankey wrote in his memoirs. 'During the meeting at which the scheme was being examined in detail he got up rather ostentatiously and walked out of the room, stopping on the way out in order to ask me to record the fact that he had withdrawn, a

[42] LHCMA, Robertson Papers, 'Scheme of Organisation of an Inter-Allied War Committee (Amended draft proposed by Mr. Lloyd George),' (4/8/5), 4 November 1917.
[43] TNA, CAB 21/91, War Cabinet, Formation of Supreme War Council, 'Scheme of Organisation of an Inter-Allied War Committee (Amended draft proposed by Mr Lloyd George, and amended by R 42, from the Chief of the Imperial General Staff,') 7 November 1917.
[44] Ibid.

request with which I complied.'[45] Hankey's biographer believed that: 'After such a display of intransigence, not to say public bad manners, it is surprising that Lloyd George did not dismiss Robertson on the spot.'[46] While Hankey thought the incident so worthy of note that he included it in his memoirs four decades later, he made no note of it in his diary at the time. Most relevantly for this study, Wilson himself, although present for the whole meeting, made no reference to it in his own diary. The omission is hard to understand if, as some sources have suggested, Wilson and Robertson were so at odds personally. A likely explanation is that Hankey, never a fan of Robertson, simply repeated a similar story included in Lloyd George's unreliable war memoirs.[47] Whatever the facts of the incident, Wilson was more concerned with the new body's structures and procedures than personal arguments with the notoriously prickly Robertson. These would come later.

The French favoured Paris as home for the nascent SWC, but Wilson was 'entirely opposed' because it was too big to allow the staffs to confer easily.[48] 'We had a conference from 10am to 1.30 trying to draft a paper bringing the Supreme Council into being …Another meeting at 5'o'[clock] when the Supreme Council sat for the first time and gave Foch and me our orders. It was also decided to have our HQ at Versailles.'[49] The orders

[45] Hankey, *Supreme Command*, (vol. II), p. 721; TNA, CAB 28/2, War Cabinet, IC (Allied Conferences), Volume II, IC 30c, '*Procès-verbal* of a Conference of the British, French and Italian Governments, held at the "New Casino Hotel", Rapallo,' 7 November 1917.
[46] Roskill, *Hankey*, p. 454.
[47] Lloyd George, *Memoirs*, (vol. II), pp. 1440-1.
[48] TNA, CAB 28/2, War Cabinet, IC (Allied Conferences), Volume II, IC 30c and 30d, '*Procès-Verbal*', Rapallo,' 7 November 1917.
[49] Wilson diary, 7 November 1917.

were for the two generals to set off immediately to the Italian Front to 'advise as to the amount and nature of the assistance to be given by the British and French governments, and as to the manner in which it should be applied'.[50]

ROBERTSON'S REARGUARD

While Wilson was away, Robertson and the Army Council got to work undermining the SWC, or more specifically its Staff. Robertson was aware of Lloyd George's antipathy towards him and his strategic priorities. Put starkly, the Prime Minister's 'primary motive was to wrest strategic control of the war from Robertson'.[51] When he accepted the post of CIGS at the end of 1915 Robertson had insisted that he should give advice to the government directly, not via the then Secretary of State for War, the beleaguered Kitchener. 'Our Bargain', as Wully called it, bestowed powers on Robertson as CIGS which were 'unprecedented in British history'.[52] Lloyd George resented the arrangement when he succeeded Kitchener in mid-1916, and the issue lay at the heart of the tension between the two when he became Prime Minister.[53] Therefore, Robertson's principal, and understandable, argument against the role of the PMR was the risk that politicians would receive mixed and potentially contradictory advice; Robertson's opinion and Wilson's opinion. In this spirit Major-General Sir

[50] TNA, CAB 21/91, War Cabinet, Formation of Supreme War Council, 'Draft terms of reference to the Allied Military Council', 7 November 1917.
[51] Woodward, *MCWR*, p. 245.
[52] Woodward, *Robertson*, p. 25.
[53] LHCMA, Robertson papers, memorandum from Robertson to Kitchener (4/3/27), 5 December 1915; a slightly revised version appears in Robertson, *Private to Field-Marshal*, pp. 239-243.

Thomas Furse, Master General of Ordnance (MGO), submitted a memorandum to the Army Council condemning the proposals as 'unpractical and dangerous to the best interests of the Allies'.[54] For the government to receive the best advice the General Staff needed to be in close, detailed and 'hourly' contact with the numerous ministries of government, and military departments. To suppose that the PMR could do so from Versailles was 'chimerical' and 'the inevitable result of the scheme will be that the Prime Minister of this country will have two official military advisers belonging to our army, the Army Council in the person of the CIGS and our Permanent Military Representative on the Supreme War Council'. Friction between the two would 'inevitably be mirrored in the relations between their respective staffs and will spread throughout the Army'. He concluded:

> It is in a crisis such as this that the Army looks to us, the Members of the Army Council, to watch over their interest and the interests of the country and we shall fail in our duty to the army and the country if we do not protest immediately and persistently against the formation of a Supreme War Council on the lines agreed upon at Rapallo.[55]

The Army Council informed the War Cabinet it 'presumed that the technical advice given by the British Military Representative will be given on behalf of the Army Council, and that he will be subject to the authority of, and receive his instructions from, the Army Council'.[56] The following day Macready, the AG, weighed in, informing Derby that the details as to

[54] LHCMA, Robertson papers, Memorandum: 'The Scheme of Organisation of a Supreme War Council', Major-General W.T. Furse, Master General of Ordnance, (4/8/8), 11 November 1917.
[55] LHCMA, Robertson papers, (4/8/8), 11 November 1917.
[56] TNA, WO 163/22, Army Council, Minutes and Précis, Proceedings of the Army Council, 12 November 1917.

Wilson's powers and responsibilities were so slight that 'I can only draw upon my imagination to visualise that officer's functions'.[57] Condemning the proposals as 'nebulous' and 'half-baked' Macready reminded Derby that as a soldier Wilson must be appointed by the Army Council and receive orders from a branch of his department: 'In the event of the technical advice given by him to the Supreme War Council being at variance with the expressed views of the Army Council, it is legally in their power, so long as he is a soldier, to remove him from his post.' Macready, so recently a supporter of Wilson, insisted that his understanding of the new system was that the PMR would only act in an advisory capacity providing information supplied by the Army Council. If the Representative was to have greater powers then he concluded that the CIGS should have the role and 'in the event of him exceeding his powers there could be no question as to how to deal with the situation.'[58]

Derby asked Robertson for his opinion. The CIGS said he was in general agreement with the MGO but that instead of an Inter-Allied Staff, 'a misnomer without an Inter-Allied C-in-C', he would establish a Military Secretariat for the SWC. This would co-ordinate information from the various Allied forces, point up contradictions and lack of co-ordination, and prepare agenda:

> Beyond this all military advice to the Supreme Council should remain in the hands of the responsible military advisers of the respective Governments. Dual advice can only lead to delay,

[57] LHCMA, Robertson papers, Adjutant General to Secretary of State, (4/8/10), 13 November 1917.
[58] Ibid.

> friction, weakening of responsibility and lack of confidence amongst the troops.[59]

The War Cabinet had no immediate answer and deputed members Smuts and Carson to seek advice from the Attorney and Solicitor Generals.[60] Their reply recognised the Army Council as the 'Supreme Military Authority', and that as Wilson was a British Army officer he was subject to their authority. The draft continued '…the Army Council are entitled to issue instructions to him, in connection with his work on the Supreme War Council, so far as the military forces of the Crown are affected'.[61] This latter sentence was crossed out by Hankey, who thought the Army Council's paper 'absurd', and was omitted from the final version.[62] This recognised the Army Council's legal authority over Wilson but pointed out that the new procedures had been drawn up:

> …to meet the requirements of an exceptionally grave situation. They [the War Cabinet] realise that the success of the new scheme, will depend largely upon the cordial co-operation and goodwill of the Army Council, on which they count.
> The War Cabinet desire to express their wish that, in developing the work of the Supreme War Council, it should be understood that the British Permanent Military Representative will have unfettered discretion as to the advice he offers.[63]

Lloyd George had acknowledged the Army Council's authority but appealed to their sense of duty, insisting on Wilson's independence. The Army Council were not to be bought off by smooth diplomatic language

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[59] LHCMA, Robertson Papers, Robertson to Secretary of State for War, (4/8/11), 15 November 1917.
[60] TNA, CAB 21/91, War Cabinet, Formation of Supreme War Council, 'Minutes of the War Cabinet', 14 November 1917.
[61] TNA, CAB 21/91, War Cabinet, Formation of Supreme War Council, 'Relations between Army Council and British Military Representative: Draft reply to the Army Council,' 15 November 1917.
[62] CAC, Hankey diary, 14 November 1917.
[63] TNA, CAB 23/4/50, War Cabinet, 16 November 1917.

and responded that they felt it 'their duty to point out the great danger that may arise from the powers proposed' for the PMR. It would create 'duality of military counsel' leading to delay which could 'imperil the successful prosecution of military operations'. The best way of minimising such dangers would be for the CIGS to attend SWC meetings. It was essential that Wilson should not tender any advice to the Council 'without first informing the Army Council of the nature of that advice.'[64] In response, Hankey prepared a eulogistic note for Lloyd George, making a virtue of Wilson's Francophilia, which stated it would be difficult to find any officer 'more peculiarly suited' to the new role than Wilson: 'Very few British Officers of any rank have the same intimate knowledge of any sympathy with the French Army.'[65] Under pressure from both the Army Council and Derby, Lloyd George agreed that Robertson could attend SWC meetings, but sidestepped further discussion about Wilson's obligations by saying it was too early to be prescriptive.[66] The War Cabinet noted the Army Council's 'desire to co-operate cordially' in the work of the SWC 'with a view to better co-ordination of effort' and felt assured the new machinery could be made to work 'in spite of the difficulties referred to by the Army Council'.[67]

[64] LHCMA, Robertson Papers, 'Proceedings (Draft) of the Army Council: response to War Cabinet', (4/8/12), 19 November 1917.
[65] PA, Hankey to Lloyd George, Lloyd George papers, (F/23/1/27), 16 November 1917.
[66] Woodward, *Lloyd George*, p. 227.
[67] TNA, CAB 21/91, War Cabinet, Formation of Supreme War Council, 'Minutes of the War Cabinet', 29 November 1917.

CREATING THE SWC

Unlike their Allies, the British lost no time setting up their new secretariat. Hankey 'determined that it must be linked up with the War Cabinet Secretariat'; in other words, he, and ultimately the Prime Minister, would control the functions of the British PMR's office.[68] On 2 November Wilson told Sackville-West that he would be going with him to Versailles as CoS.[69] He also wanted his Aide-de-Camp (ADC), Duncannon. As discussed earlier, he organised his staff 'in the same way I did my old MO Office viz: one branch to be Allies and one branch to be the Enemy'.[70] Hankey helped Wilson assemble his team while they travelled to Rapallo.[71] Hankey ensured that two of his men, Amery and Lieutenant-Colonel Lancelot Storr were attached to the secretariat. Both had worked under Hankey as Assistant Secretaries to the War Cabinet. To Wilson's irritation, the War Office placed obstacles in his way. Sackville-West 'told me of the way the WO is blocking things, Eddie Derby terrified, Wully sulky, Maurice hostile. All this will have to be straightened out.'[72] Esher urged Hankey to send Milner to support Wilson 'for heavens [sic] sake don't weaken in the face of opposition or we are done here...Now that the PM has embarked upon this Allied G[eneral] S[taff] (whether wisely or not) he must go through with it to the bitter end with extreme boldness.'[73] Matters came to

[68] Hankey, *Supreme Command*, (vol. II), p. 718.
[69] Wilson diary, 2 November 1917.
[70] Ibid., 3 November 1917; SWC History, pp. 13-15.
[71] CAC, Hankey diary, 5 November 1917; the diary entry for this date included a simple 'family tree' diagram with Wilson at the top and branches showing 'Allies' and 'Enemies' together with 'F[oreign] O[ffice]' and 'Liaisons'.
[72] Wilson diary, 19 November 1917.
[73] CAC, Esher papers, Esher to Hankey, 15 November 1917.

a head when, faced with further disagreements over his staff, Wilson saw Derby, who was:

> ...terrified of Robertson. He said I could not have Tit Willow because "it was not considered he was any good", and I could not have Duncannon because of the National Party…so I got cross and said "very well then LG can't have me."
> This startled poor Eddie and he did not know what to say and I am not sure that he is not more frightened of me than of Robertson.[74]

The argument simmered: 'I went to see Derby and of course he withdrew his objections to Tit Willow but he still stuck out about Duncannon! Silly ass.' Bonar Law, ostensibly an ally of Wilson's, was also against the appointment but Derby gave in eventually.[75] The dispute over this seemingly minor matter, and delays in providing the wherewithal to establish his secretariat, caused friction between Wilson and the War Office. From this point on Wilson's criticism of Robertson in his diary became more personal. There was further evidence of War Office pettiness when Derby refused to allow Amery to travel to France to an SWC meeting, and insisted Duncannon wear plain clothes at Versailles because he was a civilian. Derby, wrote Wilson, was 'a fool'.[76] By the next day the gloves were off:

> Long talk in the train with Milner and LG. Milner is furious with Derby for his stupid obstruction about my promotion [to full General] about Duncannon and about Amery and Milner says he won't stand it. It is quite clear to me that Robertson and his gang mean to obstruct all they can. Well we shall have a fight.[77]

[74] Wilson diary, 21 November 1917; Derby relented in December.
[75] Ibid., 22, 23 and 24 November 1917.
[76] Ibid., 26 November 1917.
[77] Ibid., 27 November 1917.

WILSON IN ITALY

The first formal session of the SWC instructed Wilson, and Foch to report on the state of the Italian Front and recommend future policy.[78] They were given complete authority to move the six Allied divisions already in Italy, or on their way, to wherever they could be useful.[79] Wilson left for Italy the next day and was back ready to start work at Versailles on 19 November.[80] The 10 days he spent as the British Army's roving adviser on military policy are relevant as much for what they reveal of him as a diplomat as a strategist. An abiding theme of this work is that in comparison with his peers, Wilson stood out as a soldier able to quickly gain the confidence of senior officers and politicians, British and Allied. While in Italy, Wilson and Foch met almost daily and seemed in general agreement about the disposal of their relative units, and those of their hapless ally.[81] For the most part Wilson appeared to defer to Foch, indisputably the more experienced field commander. Foch told Wilson and Robertson that he believed the defending forces ought to make a stand on the River Piave, the last natural barrier before Venice and the Adriatic. Robertson agreed but was 'much more pessimistic' that the river barrier could be held; Wilson shared the same view for the next week.[82]

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[78] TNA, CAB 28/3, War Cabinet, IC (Allied Conferences), Volume III, IC 30d, '*Procès-verbal* of a Conference of the British, French and Italian Governments, held at the "New Casino Hotel", Rapallo, First Session of Supreme War Council,' 7 November 1917.
[79] Ibid., Four (later increased to six) French divisions began arriving in Italy on 31 October with two British (later four) the following day; they were all in country by 25 November, J.E. Edmonds and H.R. Davies, *OH: Military Operations, Italy: 1915-1919* (London: HMSO, 1949), p. xxvii.
[80] Wilson left the Italian front for France on 17 November 1917, Wilson diary.
[81] Ibid., 10, 11, 12, 13 and 15 November 1917.
[82] Ibid., 5 November.

All agreed that the key issue was that of command. Foch wanted the Italian commander General Luigi Cadorna replacing, as did Lloyd George who held the 'overbearing' Italian in 'utter contempt'.[83] Cadorna was dismissed, at Lloyd George's insistence, at the Rapallo meeting and at Hankey's suggestion nominated as the Italian representative on the SWC: 'I fancy that this suggestion had the double effect of tiding the Italians round a difficult corner and rendering Ll[oyd] G[eorge]'s scheme of a Supreme War Council more acceptable to them.'[84] As for command of the British forces, Wilson's persuasive skills were put to the test on the journey to Rapallo. On 3 November, Maurice wrote to Robertson: 'Latest development is that Prime Minister[,] anxious to ensure British Supremacy in Italy[,] is going to try to persuade Haig to take supreme command there, and if he accepts will try to force this on French and Italians.'[85] It is unclear where this notion originated; at the War Cabinet meeting the previous day, Rawlinson had been discussed as a possible candidate.[86] Whatever its source, Maurice also mentioned the idea to Wilson as the British delegation set off for Rapallo:

> This of course is fantastic and I told LG so on the destroyer, and that the best we could do would be to get the English and French under one commander who ought to be an Englishman (Plumer for example) and who by his knowledge and character would practically command the broken Italians also.[87]

[83] Cassar, *Forgotten Front*, p. 81.
[84] CAC, Hankey diary, 7 November 1917.
[85] Woodward, *MCWR*, Maurice to Robertson (via Delmé-Radcliffe), 3 November 1917, p. 250.
[86] TNA, CAB, 24/4/37, War Cabinet, 2 November 1917, (original emphasis).
[87] Wilson diary, 3 November 1917; General Sir Herbert Plumer was commanding Second Army in Flanders.

In an illustration of Wilson's influence with the Prime Minister, his proposal was accepted and on 6 November Wilson 'got Robertson to wire for Plumer to come down at once, and take up the command - I hope - of both French and English'.[88] Wilson's motivation for proposing Plumer is open to conjecture, but the result was that his old friend Rawly, who had spent most of 1917 kicking his heels, took command of Plumer's Second Army in Flanders.[89] While Rawlinson was delighted with the appointment,[90] Wilson's suggestion was not welcomed by Haig, who was ordered to send two more of his divisions to Italy, making a total of four. 'Was ever an Army commander and his staff sent off to another theatre of war in the middle of a battle?', he asked. Unaware that the Plumer idea had originated with Wilson and not Lloyd George, he condemned politicians as 'very ignorant and troublesome people!!'[91] The loss of at least four divisions from his front to Italy caused Haig to protest to Robertson that 'nothing should be done to stop our offensive next spring.'[92] It was to no avail.

In Italy Wilson, exhibiting his flexible belief in the notion of unity of command, pressed for Plumer to be given overall command of the Allies, but it came to nothing. He attempted to over-rule Cadorna's orders for the withdrawal of the Italian First and Fourth Armies from strategically important high ground 'though not attacked and no sign of the enemy…this seems idiotic'.[93] With Cadorna relieved and his successor

[88] Wilson diary, 6 November 1917.
[89] CAC, Rawlinson papers, War journal, 8 November 1917.
[90] Prior and Wilson, *Rawlinson*, pp. 272-3.
[91] NLS, Haig (manuscript), diary, Acc. 3155/97, 7 November 1917.
[92] Ibid., 10 November 1917.
[93] Wilson diary, 8 November 1917.

General Armando Diaz not yet in place Wilson and Foch were powerless to intervene. The next day they met Diaz who accepted Wilson's advice and countermanded Cadorna's orders.[94] A 'long and heated discussion' over placement of the French forces, which brought out the worst in the 'characteristically brusque and dogmatic' Foch were only brought to an amicable conclusion by 'the intervention of the charming and smooth-talking Wilson.'[95] Nonetheless, Wilson remained pessimistic about the prospects for holding the enemy: 'The loss of Venice means the loss of the Adriatic and a serious threat therefore to Salonica and Egypt, but I am afraid this is coming.[96] A day later, confident of his authority, and perceiving Diaz as a compliant ally, he wrote and asked him to prepare rearward lines along the River Brenta: 'Diaz thanked me for my letter and would see to the rearward lines at once'.[97] As Jeffery has argued: 'Wilson at times operated as if he had executive command of Italian forces'. He often adopted a similar approach, or at least an assumption that he was first amongst equals, while British PMR to the SWC.

WILSON AT THE SWC

Wilson arrived in Paris on 19 November. Before he left Italy, he had told Foch that 'I was anxious to get off to Versailles as soon as I could so as to get on with next year's plans, and he said he was equally anxious.' Two days later Foch's CoS, General Maxime Weygand, informed Wilson that his government had decided that as Foch was commander of the French

[94] Wilson diary, 9 November 1917.
[95] Edmonds and Davies, *OH: Italy*, p. 92; Cassar, *Forgotten Front*, p. 87.
[96] Wilson diary, 9 November 1917.
[97] Ibid., 10 November 1917.

troops in Italy he had to remain until the crisis was over.[98] As soon as he arrived in Paris, Wilson saw Clemenceau, who had become Prime Minister three days earlier. 'Clemenceau told [me] he had ordered Foch to remain in Italy for the present – a stupid thing to do as I told him, for the Superior Council has many important things to deal with at once.'[99] The incident is an example, even allowing for a degree of hubris, of Wilson's ready access and easy manner with both French politicians and soldiers, unique amongst senior British military officers at the time. The next day he called on the President of the Republic, Raymond Poincaré, who was 'most friendly and all in favour of the Supreme Council. I told him to recall Foch and he rather agreed.'[100] Despite these positive remarks, the matter of Foch and the identity of the French PMR rumbled on until the Second Session of the SWC when Weygand was confirmed in the role.[101] The effect of French prevarication was that Wilson and his team got to work immediately. From the date of Wilson's return to France on 19 November 1917, to his appointment as CIGS on 18 February 1918, the Inter-Allied Staff of the SWC produced 15 Joint Notes on a broad range of strategic and military policy issues. Nine more, set in train during Wilson's time as PMR, followed over the next two months. From its inception to the Armistice in November 1918 the SWC staff produced 40 Joint Notes.[102]

[98] Wilson diary, 13, 16 and 19 November 1917.
[99] Ibid., 19 November 1917, original emphasis.
[100] Ibid., 20 November 1917.
[101] TNA, CAB 28/3, War Cabinet, IC (Allied Conferences), Volume III, IC 36 (SWC), '*Procès-Verbal* of the Second Session of Supreme War Council,' I December 1917.
[102] A full list of the Joint Notes is in TNA, CAB 25/127, 'SWC History', pp. 65-6.

THE JOINT NOTES

This section examines the work of the SWC and its staff while Wilson was British PMR and argues that his strategic views dominated proceedings. Three of the Joint Notes produced during Wilson's period at Versailles (numbers 1, 12 and 14) feature to a greater or lesser extent in key texts in the historiography, but the remainder have not been analysed in detail, with little consideration of their broader impact. This section aims to fill this gap. The Notes are considered thematically; as a body of work they covered three main policy areas:

- Allied strategy in 1918, with specific reference to the Western Front
- Policy in relation to theatres away from the Western Front
- An inter-Allied approach to the tools (especially aircraft and tanks) and infrastructure of war, (i.e. supply, transportation and communications)

JN12 made proposals for the 1918 Allied Campaign for the Western Front and beyond and JN 14 concerned the creation of an Allied General Reserve for the Western Front, with an Executive War Board (EWB) to control it. Their recommendations, and the controversies they engendered, led directly to departure of Robertson as CIGS with Wilson as his replacement. As a result, these Joint Notes are discussed in Chapter 5, devoted to Unity of Command.

WESTERN FRONT STRATEGY: JOINT NOTES 1, 2 AND 10

Joint Note No. 1, 'Military Policy', 13 December 1917[103]

This report, essentially a shopping list of subjects the SWC's PMRs intended to consider, set the agenda for Allied policy priorities in 1918. Its main recommendations appear in the historiography but how Wilson worked with the inter-Allied Staff and his fellow PMRs to achieve his own strategic priorities merits further examination. In early December, Wilson complained that while he and his men were 'busy in the office all day' there was 'no sign at all' of the French, Italian or American staffs.[104] Wilson's strategy paper of October had begun the process of formally questioning the current military orthodoxy and favoured a defensive posture until adequate resources were available.[105] Once in a position of influence, if not authority, he was able to develop these themes.

The context of Joint Note 1 was the imminent armistice on the Russian front,[106] 'the present position with regard to Man-power in the Allied countries, and the necessity imposed of finding men for production of Munitions, the replacement of tonnage, and increase of domestic food production'.[107] At a meeting of the PMRs on 8 December Wilson:

> …passed round some notes I had made on the necessity for producing - as our first paper - recommendations that the whole line from N Sea to Adriatic and Salonica should assume the Defensive

[103] Copies of the first 14 Joint Notes are at TNA, WO 158/57, 'Supreme War Council: Joint Notes'.
[104] Wilson diary, 2 and 3 December 1917.
[105] CAB 27/8, WP 61.
[106] Russian and German forces agreed an armistice on 15 December 1917.
[107] TNA, WO 158/57, 'Supreme War Council: Joint Notes', Joint Note 1, 13 December 1917, p. 1.

> and develop all means of Defence, rest troops, form Reserves, develop rail communications, develop material, manpower, etc, and I said I wanted this matter considered and a paper written as soon as possible.[108]

Wilson's staff prepared a draft and Weygand submitted a version which was 'slightly different'. In an illustration of Wilson's influence over this group, he and Cadorna accepted Weygand's contribution 'subject to any slight alteration General Wilson might wish to introduce later'.[109] Although he appeared to be making progress, Wilson's travails with the War Office continued. The Army Council repeated its insistence that Wilson send his recommendations to them first:

> Another bid by the Army Council to keep a hold of me by an order to submit first to them any advice I was going to give to the Supreme Council. I wrote at once to Hankey enclosing a copy of the order and pointing out that I (Wilson) did not advise the Supreme Council but I was only one of four and that all our advice was collective and therefore could not be sent to the WO of any one country. This is a stumper for that old fool Robertson who is not playing the game.[110]

In direct defiance, Wilson, who had already told Lloyd George he would send his reports only to him, persuaded his fellow PMRs to agree that their first report should go to their respective Prime Ministers 'and to no one else'.[111] It recommended that 'a definite and coordinated system of defence from the North Sea to the Adriatic must be adopted by the Allies.' This would be achieved by a review of existing defensive arrangements and, in the expectation of a German offensive in 1918, the construction of

[108] Wilson diary, 8 December 1917, (original emphasis).
[109] TNA, CAB 25/120, 'Supreme War Council: Papers and Minutes,' Minutes of a meeting of the Military Representatives, 12 December 1917.
[110] Wilson diary 8 December 1917; Wilson papers, (HHW 2/6/2), Wilson to Hankey, 9 December 1917.
[111] Wilson diary, 22 November, and 11 December 1917.

'further and successive defensive lines to check an advance by the enemy'.[112] JN1 did not rule out 'minor forms of active defence' necessary for maintaining the offensive spirit of troops:

> Furthermore the policy of a strong defensive not only does not preclude, but actually prepares for any offensive measures in any theatre of war as may be decided upon for 1918 when the present political situation in Russia, and the military situation in Italy are more clearly defined.[113]

The PMRs recommended a defensive posture in the Balkans but acknowledged a major enemy attack leading to 'a systematic and pre-arranged retirement' from the existing front was possible. Significantly for future events, Wilson and his colleagues also mooted the need for a 'mobile reserve' and called for men to be rested and trained to serve in it.[114]

The note raised another abiding theme of the SWC, the need for improvements to, and closer integration of, rail and sea communications, particularly in respect of the Italian front, and in the event of a German attack through Switzerland.[115] On the same co-operative theme it recommended 'co-ordinated development to the utmost' for the manufacture of war materials, together with a 'study of the possibilities of a coordinated Air offensive on the largest possible scale'.[116] In summary, JN1 advocated a strategy of strong defence in the west and in the

[112] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 1, 13 December 1917, p. 1.
[113] Ibid., p. 2.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid; the French were concerned about a German offensive through Switzerland. Nivelle told Wilson he feared an attack involving 30 divisions, Wilson diary, 9 December 1917.
[116] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 1, 13 December 1917, p. 3.

Balkans, while forces were marshalled and material stockpiled for an offensive. Future notes addressed these issues in more detail.

Joint Note No. 2, 'Increase in the number of divisions in the Belgian Army', 20 December 1917[117]

The second session of the SWC met at Versailles for its first substantive meeting on 1 December 1917. Diminishing manpower resources had plagued both the British and French armies in 1917. In his opening address, written by Hankey,[118] Clemenceau said sending troops to Italy was 'a considerable drain on the strength of the Anglo-French forces on the Western front, and correspondingly weakens their power of offence and defence'.[119] The war had become 'largely one of exhaustion'. It was essential to make better use of the Belgian Army 'which so far had been doing very little except issuing communiqués'. The Council asked the PMR to advise.[120]

The issue of Belgian military strategy had been a sore point for both the British and French since the beginning of trench warfare. The Belgians never formally declared war on Germany and since the autumn of 1914 its six divisions had sat on the defensive behind inundated land adjacent to the River Yser 'as secure as any force along the Western front, for the

[117] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 2, 20 December 1917.
[118] Hankey, *Supreme Command*, (vol. II), p. 732.
[119] TNA, CAB 28/3, War Cabinet, IC (Allied Conferences), Volume III, IC 36 (SWC), '*Procès-Verbal* of the Second Session of Supreme War Council,' I December 1917.
[120] Ibid.

next four years.'[121] The Belgian King, Albert, who commanded his country's forces, refused to participate in what he considered to be costly and ineffective offensives and maintained an abiding suspicion of the expansionist motives of Britain and France. At the end of 1914 Wilson had asked Tom Bridges, GHQ's liaison officer with the Belgian Army, to propose that the country's divisions be incorporated into the British forces in Flanders. King Albert refused.[122] Both France and Britain attempted to amalgamate Belgian units with their own, with similar results.[123] By the end of 1917, at a time of acute manpower shortages, Britain and France were running out of patience with their 'obstreperous ally' and expected her to do more.[124]

In fact, the Belgian General Staff had already considered reorganising its army, which since 1913 had comprised six divisions, each of 18 battalions (a total of 108 battalions), by increasing its complement of artillery. The PMRs decided that this would create 'very cumbrous' divisions.[125] The French, who would provide the guns, produced a scheme increasing the six divisions to nine, each of nine battalions (a total of 81 battalions). The remaining 27 battalions would be used to create the newly equipped artillery units.[126] The British Staff supported the plan, Studd noting the 'many disadvantages in having a Belgian division which differs so widely

[121] William Philpott, 'Britain, France and the Belgian Army', in Brian Bond et. al., *'Look to Your Front': Studies in the First World War by the British Commission for Military History* (Staplehurst, Spellmount, 1999), p. 122.
[122] Wilson diary, 27 December 1914, and 2 January 1915.
[123] Greenhalgh, *Victory Through Coalition*, p. 22.
[124] Philpott, 'Britain, France and the Belgian Army', p. 124.
[125] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 2, 20 December 1917.
[126] TNA, CAB 25/47, Supreme War Council, 'Reorganisation of Belgian Army, papers submitted by General Weygand', December 1917.

from that of the British or French'.[127] At Wilson's insistence the Joint Note made clear that the provision of additional artillery 'must be conditional on an increase in the offensive or defensive activity of the Belgian Army, according to circumstances and governed by the general plan for the employment of the armies of the entente'.[128] The efficient working of the Inter-Allied staff, especially on non-contentious issues, is illustrated by the fact that these proposals were formally approved at the Third Session of the SWC at the end of January 1918, by which time they had already been put into effect.[129]

Joint Note 10, 'Extension of the British Front', 10 January 1918[130]

The length of trench held by the BEF and the French had been a bone of contention since the outbreak of hostilities. In the first 18 months of the war Britain had been the junior partner with a small but growing army. Following enormous losses in the first two years, the French wanted the British to take over more of the front from them. Britain argued, especially from mid-1917, that it was doing more than its share of offensive fighting. Further, the Flanders sector straddling the Franco-Belgian border, although short in comparison with the line held by the French, was strategically vital - and vulnerable - because of its proximity to the Channel Ports. Wilson's advice to the Cabinet in October 1917 had been that no

[127] TNA, CAB 25/47, (note attached to file by Brigadier-General Studd, 14 December 1917).
[128] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 2, 20 December 1917 and TNA, CAB 25/120, Supreme War Council: Papers and Minutes, 'Minutes of a meeting of the Military Representatives,' 17 December 1917.
[129] TNA, CAB 28/3, War Cabinet, IC (Allied Conferences), Volume III, IC 39 (a) to 44 (a) (SWC), 'Resolutions passed at the Third Session of Supreme War Council, January to February 1918'. (The SWC met from 31 January to 2 February 1918).
[130] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 10, 10 January 1918.

decisions should be taken until Allied strategy for 1918 had been settled. Wilson's prominent role in the deliberations of late 1917 and early 1918 is worthy of further attention, illustrating his powers of persuasion, levels of access and, ultimately in this case, their limits. Because the issue of extending the British front was entirely dependent on manpower, the deliberations over JN 10 are discussed in Chapter 4.

STRATEGY IN OTHER THEATRES: JOINT NOTES 3,4,5, AND 6

Joint Note 3, 'Reinforcements to Italian Front', 21 December 1917 and Joint Note 6, 'The Italian Problem', 25 December 1917[131]

By the time the PMRs met, the crisis on the Italian front had been averted and the line stabilised. JN3 acknowledged the pressures on the Western front following the 'total collapse of Russia'. There had been no new developments in Italy, therefore no additional reinforcements would be spared. The PMRs agreed that the British and French General Staffs should reinforce the Italians 'at the most dangerous points' with all the artillery they had in theatre.[132] The related JN6 took a similar line, repeated the agreed Allied policy on standing on the defensive and urged the Italians to continue building defence in depth, especially around Venice. Due to man-power problems the Italians were urged 'with all despatch' to push on with the reorganisation and retraining of their army to facilitate the withdrawal of all or part of the Anglo-French [forces] in Italy at

[131] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 3, 21 December 1917, and Joint Note 6, 25 December 1917.
[132] Ibid.

the earliest possible date.'[133] Wilson's 11-day sojourn in Italy in November inevitably influenced his contribution to JN3 and 6 and, as will be shown in Chapter 6, his creative approach to British strategy away from France and Flanders ensured it retained priority at the War Office. As CIGS during the German Spring Offensives of 1918 he attempted to finally impose British control over the Italian Army in response to what he feared was an inevitable attack.[134]

Joint Note 4, 'The Balkan Problem', 23 December 1917[135]

This note represented a clear example of 'joined-up' Allied strategic thinking of a kind not seen before the SWC was created. Although the Third Session of the SWC on 1 February merely asked for additional details, thanks to the work of Wilson and his team, its findings had already been accepted as Allied policy on the ground. JN4 recommended the abandonment of the important Greek port city of Salonika (modern Thessaloniki) if it was attacked by overwhelming forces. This, Wilson successfully argued, was better than the loss of the whole of mainland Greece.[136] Since 1916 an Allied force of French, British, Serbian, Greek, Italian and Russian divisions had been under the unified command of French General Maurice Sarrail. Clemenceau's call at the Second Session of the SWC on 1 December for the PMRs' advice on strategy resulted in Wilson taking the initiative. He conducted a 'war game' and on 10 December produced a draft report which introduced the prospect of

[133] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 6, 25 December 1917.
[134] Cassar, *Forgotten Front*, pp. 136-150.
[135] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 4, 23 December 1917.
[136] Ibid.

withdrawal 'in the event of a powerful attack'.[137] Amery produced a typically detailed study.[138] It calculated that following the enemy's occupation of much of Romania, with its strategically valuable rail network, the Allies' 23 divisions around Salonika could soon be facing 45 of the enemy. The mixed composition of the Allied force was exacerbated by internal political issues. The Serbian Army, 'which in actual fighting value may be regarded as superior to any of the other Allied contingents' had suffered terribly from continuous fighting and 'not too considerate or sympathetic treatment' from its officers. Large-scale desertions could not be ruled out, Amery warned. As for the three 'weak' Greek divisions 'though they do not want to fight at all, would probably just as soon fight against the Allies as for them'.[139] In the event of a major offensive, the Allies had three options; keep control of Salonika but lose Greece, abandon Salonika to retain Greece, but suffer the consequences for Allied prestige, or defend Salonika for as long as possible while strengthening the defence of the Greek mainland.[140] The paper favoured the third option, with the proviso that Salonika itself might have to be given up eventually.

Wilson rehearsed the findings in Amery's paper when he met Sarrail's successor General Adolphe Guillaumat:

> I told him I thought his first duty was to make love to the Servians [sic] and put a Servian on his staff, that Sarrail had treated the Servians very badly with result that if we retired from Monastir it

[137] TNA, CAB 25/120/11, Supreme War Council: Papers and Minutes, 'Draft by Sir Henry Wilson of a Joint Note which it is suggested should be submitted by the Permanent Military Representatives to the Supreme War Council,' 10 December 1917.
[138] TNA, CAB 25/120/14, Supreme War Council: Papers and Minutes, 'Notes on the Military Situation in the Balkans,' 12 December 1917.
[139] Ibid., pp. 4-5.
[140] Ibid., p. 9.

> was quite possible that the Servians would leave us. … It was quite clear that he had not considered the problem at all…he did not impress me.[141]

The French still felt it possible to hold both Salonika and protect Greece.[142] It was hardly surprising, therefore, that they reacted badly when Wilson gave his recommendations about Italy and Salonika to his colleagues: 'This brought Weygand flying to my room to say the Italians must stand etc. etc. He got quite excited and said he would never agree to my notes. Quite amusing. …When Weygand left me he posted off to see Foch!'[143] The French ultimately accepted Wilson's analysis. On 30 December Guillaumat read out his orders, signed by Clemenceau and Foch, to Lieutenant-General Sir George Milne, the commander of the British forces:

> In these it was laid down that the Allied Armies under his command would be based not only upon Salonika but upon the whole of Greece…in the event of a retreat, it was more important to cover Old Greece than to retain Salonika.[144]

Joint Note 5, 'The situation in Russia,' 24 December 1917[145]

When Russia signed an armistice with Germany in mid-December 1917 the Allies had no agreed strategy. Wilson and his fellow PMRs had a blank canvas. His team produced several policy papers and the resulting JN5 was their outline of the challenges facing the Allies. The War Cabinet had asked whether the PMRs believed anti-Bolshevik forces in Southern Russia, and the Romanian Army, could resist Bolshevik forces 'assisted

[141] Wilson diary, 12 December 1917.
[142] Ibid., 13 December 1917.
[143] Ibid., 21 December 1917.
[144] Cyril Falls, *OH: Military Operations: Macedonia, vol. II* (London: HMSO1935), p. 49.
[145] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 5, 24 December 1917.

and controlled by the Germans'.[146] The Representatives restricted their Note to the consequences if the Bolsheviks were left unhindered:

1. Wheat from Odessa and oil from Batoum (Batumi in modern-day Georgia) would be appropriated by the Central Powers, negating the Allied blockades of neutral Holland and Scandinavia. Germany could supply wheat to Switzerland, in place of supplies from the US, and 'would be able to force the Swiss to concede a free passage to their armies' into Italy.
2. Even if Southern Russia was lost it was important for the Allies to retain key naval bases on the Black Sea, including Batoum, Trebizond (modern Trabzon) and Novorissisk (Novorissysk).
3. The Allies should help Romania by establishing relationships with the Ukraine and 'the Cossack countries to secure supplies'.

The advisors were of the opinion that 'all national groups who are determined to continue the war must be supported by all means in our power'. They realised such resistance could not be sustained indefinitely unless the Allies found alternative supply routes.[147]

[146] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 5, 24 December 1917.
[147] Ibid.

COORDINATION OF THE 'TOOLS OF WAR': JOINT NOTES 7,8,9, AND 13

Logistics: Joint Note 8 ('Transportation'), 8 January 1918[148], and Joint Note 13 ('Supply'), 25 January 1918[149]

By 1917 the British Army had mastered the art of logistics, supplying the troops in the field with the tools they needed to fight an industrialised war.[150] France had done the same. What the Allies had not done was establish mechanisms for sharing these hard-learned lessons and combining activities to mutual advantage. What was in place, and for the most part worked well, was a port and railway infrastructure which ensured men and supplies reached the front lines, but which for the most part operated independently. One of the *raison d'etre* of the SWC was to ensure better co-operation between France, Britain and Italy. The growing presence of an increasingly important US partner made this even more urgent.

Transportation

The PMRs said Inter-Allied transportation should be placed on a 'definitely coordinated basis' urgently. They recommended a 'small strong Inter-Allied Expert Committee', reporting to the SWC. This would assess current systems, future projects and possibilities and make recommendations on 'their co-ordination on the most efficient lines'. The initial priorities were:

[148] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 8, 8 January 1918.
[149] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 13, 25 January 1918.
[150] See Ian Malcolm Brown, *British Logistics on the Western Front 1914-1919* (Westport, CT. and London: Praeger 1998).

1. Co-ordination and improvement of railways behind the British, French and Italian fronts 'and the machinery necessary for their employment as one system.
2. Rail and shipping facilities in Greece to serve as alternative lines of defence to those already in place.
3. A railway scheme to help in the defeat of Turkey in Palestine.
4. Identification of sites on the enemy communications system 'where the maximum effect could be obtained by aeroplane attack'.[151]

As with the other Joint Notes in this section, the common sense and non-controversial nature of the proposal meant that the Third Session of the SWC approved it on 1 February 1918, a decision which 'reflected the crucial importance of transportation in the way the war was fought.'[152] The Inter-Allied Transportation Council began work in late March, and, alongside other achievements, 'improved the lines of communication, especially those with Italy, and brought about better use of various Inter-Allied rolling stock'.[153]

Supply

Again, the Joint Note proposed an expert committee to co-ordinate Allied supply systems, identify areas of need and speed up organisational

[151] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 8, 9 January 1918.
[152] Greenhalgh, *Victory Through Coalition*, p. 181.
[153] CAB 25/127 SWC History, p. 12, and CAB 125/110, 'Inter-Allied Transportation Council (Organisation and Functions)'.

structures. This expert committee met simultaneously and alongside the Transportation body.[154]

Joint Notes 7 ('Aviation'), and Joint Note 9 ('Tanks'), 8 January 1918[155]

As with the previous two notes, Inter-Allied Expert Committees were set up. The priorities of the Aviation body were to establish the minimum requirements of the national air forces on each front, the creation of Inter-Allied strategic air formations and their deployment, to plan 'systematic and scientific obliteration of areas in enemy territory vital to his munition supply', and the use of air power in the Eastern Mediterranean to disrupt Turkish military operations.[156] Wilson had bemoaned the state of Allied aviation strategy in December. No country, except possibly the French, he said, 'had any programme that was real' and recommended Lord Rothermere, who had just taken over the new British Air Ministry, come to Versailles to 'explain his views.'[157] The Inter-Allied Aviation Committee met first on 9 May 1918 and 'studied and unified' the future programme of Inter-Allied aviation. In addition, it led to the creation of an 'Inter-Allied long-distance bombing force, the British nucleus of which contributed in the course of its …operations to the partial and total destruction of lines of communication', hampering the supply of food and munitions.[158] Wilson promoted this body at Versailles and as CIGS. One of his deputies at the

[154] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 13, 25 January 1918.
[155] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Notes 7 and 9, 8 January 1918.
[156] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 7, 8 January 1918.
[157] TNA, CAB 25/120/17, SWC, British Secretariat, Minutes and Papers, PMR meeting, 8 December 1918.
[158] TNA, CAB 125/26, SWC History, p. 11.

SWC, Brigadier-General Frederick 'Freddie' Sykes became Chief of the Air Staff in April 1918. Wilson supported Sykes' appointment and the two worked closely together for the rest of the war.[159]

JN9, setting up the Inter-Allied Tank Committee, illustrated the absence of coordinated thinking on use of the new weapon. The knowledge gap was to be filled by a review of needs for the proper deployment of tanks on each front, the 'speedy' creation of Inter-Allied reserve formations, and suggestions for the immediate creation of Inter-Allied anti-tank measures.[160] Despite the explicit call for haste, it first met on 6 May. The SWC history credited the initiative with improving co-operation around tank design, promoting best practice, and establishing an Allied school of instruction. It also claimed the body speeded production by hastening the construction of the Inter-Allied tank factory at Chateuroux. This enterprise, set up under an Anglo-American agreement, has been described as 'one of the most far-sighted and enterprising bits of industrial co-operation in the whole war'.[161] In fact, the project was beset with difficulties. Churchill, at the Ministry of Munitions, complained in August 1918 that labour problems meant that the factory was not finished, despite the materials being available for the tanks themselves. The factory was eventually completed and met its production targets for 1919.[162]

[159] Ash, *Sykes*.
[160] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 9 'Tanks', 8 January 1918.
[161] J.P. Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks: British Military Thought: 1903-1939*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 136.
[162] Martin Gilbert, *Churchill and America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), p. 81.

CONCLUSION

Wilson's seminal strategy paper of October 1917 led directly to the establishment of the SWC the following month, but there was no guarantee that it would serve any useful purpose. Despite recent setbacks on the Western Front the alliance of Haig and Robertson retained powerful friends in government, at Court and in the Press. Allied enthusiasm for the Council was lukewarm, particularly in France whose new Prime Minister had not been involved in its creation. Wilson and his team were encouraged by the Prime Minister and Milner but faced a rearguard action from the CIGS and the Army Council, and the Secretary of State for War. Wilson had a challenge if the new body was to make a difference. As the discussion above has shown, Wilson's energy in galvanising an able team ensured British ideas dominated the work of the inter-Allied Staff and fed directly through to the decisions of the politicians on the War Council. Rather than a 'talking shop', as one authority has described the SWC, it ensured, for the first time in the war, that the Allies considered strategy options co-operatively and thoroughly and presented their conclusions to a formal gathering of statesmen. The German Spring Offensives of 1918 superseded several of the Joint Notes produced by Wilson and his colleagues, perhaps explaining why the majority of them have received limited critical attention until now. Conversely, those concerned with future Allied military policy on the Western Front formalised the approach Wilson had outlined in October; no new offensive in Flanders in 1918 while the Allies regrouped and awaited the arrival of the Americans. The issue of the length of the British line, so long a bug-bear in Anglo-French relations, had

at its root the even more controversial issue of manpower resources. The next chapter considers Wilson's contribution to this vexed question.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MANPOWER CRISIS

In 1918 the British army on the Western Front was 'able to prosecute a "rich man's war", possibly for the only time in its history.'[1] This alludes to the successful focusing of Britain's economic and manufacturing resources on the production of war *materiel*. For Wilson and his colleagues, when it came to that other fundamental resource, manpower, the country was in dire straits. Wilson summed up the problem: 'It is clear to me that L[loyd]G[eorge] is getting into a beastly mess about manpower, about Ireland and about taking over the lines, and if he is not careful he will be swamped by this.'[2] The BEF's manpower reservoir was draining faster than it was being topped up. France, on its knees after three and a half years of war, was pushing Britain to take over miles of trench line. The Allies' much-vaunted saviour, the USA, had been disappointingly slow to provide the troops the entente powers had been relying on to meet the needs of another year of war.[3] As Britain's PMR at the SWC, and from February 1918 as CIGS, one of Wilson's greatest challenges was balancing the pressing needs of the army with the realities of coalition warfare, and a political establishment weary of the war and the toll it was taking on the population.

[1] J.M. Bourne, *Who's Who in World War I* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 176.
[2] Wilson diary, 21 January 1918.
[3] Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory*, p. 235.

Manpower dominated British policy-making throughout the Great War. By mid-1917 it had taken centre stage – a position it maintained until the end of the conflict. For the British Army's commanders, there were never enough men, particularly for the Western Front. For the politicians, the soldiers' insatiable demands for troops had to be balanced against a long list of pressures at home, with the production of war *materiel* at the top. By autumn 1917 Wilson had a unique perspective on the challenges facing Britain's political and military leadership. He had begun the year with an inspection tour of the Eastern Front, and come away dismayed at the state of the Imperial Russian Army. This was followed by his second stint as senior British liaison officer with the French Army, where he saw the morale-sapping failure of the Nivelle Offensive and its aftermath.[4] In November he had toured the front in north-east Italy following the debacle of the Battle of Caporetto.[5] As British PMR at Versailles, Wilson helped frame Anglo-French responses to the manpower challenge.

Wilson had supported compulsory national service on the continental model for years. When his mentor Lord Roberts became president of the National Service League in 1905, Wilson drafted his speeches.[6] In late 1917 Wilson believed there were still men to be found if only the government had the will to make unpopular decisions, especially in

[4] The Nivelle Offensive, also known as the Second Battle of the Aisne, began on 16 April 1917.
[5] The Battle of Caporetto began on 24 October 1917.
[6] Ian F.W. Beckett 'The Nation in Arms', in Ian F.W. Beckett and Keith Simpson (eds.), *A Nation in Arms: A Social Study of the British Army in the First World War* (London: Tom Donovan, 1990 [1985]), p. 4; Jeffery, *Wilson*, pp. 76, 108-9; in 1913, Wilson, French and Kiggell submitted a General Staff paper supporting some form of conscription, Wilson diary, 12 April 1913.

relation to Ireland. If this happened, he believed, British arms would both bolster French resolve and ensure Britain dominated the peace. As early as September 1915, he had lobbied Lord Bertie, Britain's ambassador in Paris, in favour of compulsion. Robertson, then the BEF's CoS, had told Bertie he was 'doubtful if conscription was necessary or advisable. The d[amned]] old coward and skunk,' wrote Wilson of Wully.[7] In time soldiers, including Robertson, and statesmen, came over to the view that compulsory conscription was the only answer to the demands of modern industrialised warfare.[8] What divided opinion was the nature of such a policy, its parameters and scope. Wilson believed military conscription was essential, plus compulsory national service for essential industries on the home front.

The challenge of manpower was a complex web of interdependent pressures and often contradictory priorities. In late 1917 Britain's military situation was in a parlous state. The two major campaigns of the year, at Arras and Ypres, together with the Battle of Cambrai, had resulted in enormous casualties.[9] As a result of these set-backs, the War Office and GHQ's power over strategy-making was diminishing, in favour of Wilson and the SWC. Although this body grew in influence, it did not exercise executive authority. Lloyd George might have enhanced his control over

[7] Wilson diary, 19 September 1915.
[8] Milner urged the Asquith government to adopt conscription in early 1915, P.A. Lockwood, 'Milner's entry into the War Cabinet: December 1916', *The Historical Journal*, vol. VII (1), (1964), p. 212; also, Gollin, *Proconsul in Politics*, pp. 238-9.
[9] The BEF suffered 759,000 casualties (killed, missing, wounded and prisoners) in 1917, *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War 1914-1920* (London: HMSO, 1922), p. 361.

his generals, but he had not tamed them. The PMRs offered advice, as a group; they could neither issue orders nor countermand those of the commanders in the field.[10] It was up to the heads of government to decide whether to accept the advice given. Wilson offered plenty of welcome advice to his Prime Minister. Lloyd George sought decisive victory over Germany, but favoured a policy of 'active defence' in the west while the entente awaited the arrival of the Americans. By accepting Wilson's strategy for 1918 the Prime Minister also accepted that successes in other theatres would be a bonus, not the priority.[11]

When Wilson took up his post at the SWC, in November 1917, it was apparent that the AEF might not be in place in strategically significant numbers until 1919. The capitulation of Russia in late 1917 meant the inevitable transfer of large numbers of enemy troops to the west and a likely German offensive in the first half of 1918. Facing this threat was a British force in need of rest, training and reinforcement. The situation was complicated by the SWC's decision in January 1918 to create an allied 'General Reserve', something both British and French C-in-Cs resisted.[12] Wilson found himself at the heart of this civil-military conundrum, one which grew in intensity once he became CIGS. During the final 12 months of the war Wilson had real power for the first time, but with it came responsibility. This chapter reassesses how he responded to that challenge.

[10] TNA, CAB 28/3, War Cabinet, IC (Allied Conferences), Volume III, IC 30d (SWC).
[11] CAB 27/8, 20 October 1917, WP 61.
[12] See p. 215.

BRITISH MANPOWER CHALLENGES

Nearly a month before the Battle of Third Ypres ended, Britain's politicians were given a stark warning of the size of the military manpower problem. In the autumn of 1917, in response to the generals' continuing demands for troops, and the government's failure to develop a coherent manpower policy, the Ministry of National Service was created, headed by Sir Auckland Geddes.[13] He was required 'somehow to utilise better – given the powers provided him by the State – what human resources were left to his care'. On 13 October 1917, he submitted to the War Cabinet a 'shocking' document.[14] 'The whole country' was 'close to the limit of its human resources'. He assumed a 'wastage' total for the period 1 October 1917 to 30 September 1918 of 800,000 men across all theatres; in line with losses of the previous 12 months. 'Combing out' men from essential industries might produce 270,000, with another 150,000 if conscription was imposed on Ireland, or if the upper age limit for compulsory service was increased from 41 to 50. In other words, even with radical changes to recruiting rules, only about half the predicted losses could be made up in the coming year.[15] The challenge to find men fit enough for front-line service was made worse by the poor state of health of many recruits.[16] This paper fell on Lloyd George's desk two days after he had ordered

[13] For a detailed review of the various abortive attempts to establish a coherent manpower policy before autumn 1917 see Adams and Poirier, *Conscription Controversy*, and Keith Grieves, *The Politics of Manpower* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).
[14] Adams and Poirier, *Conscription Controversy*, p. 213.
[15] TNA, CAB 24/28/95, 'Recruiting Position: the Problem and Prospect', Memorandum to the War Cabinet by the Minister of National Service, 13 October 1917.
[16] R.J. Clarke, '"Fit to Fight?" How the physical condition of the conscripts contributed to the manpower crisis of 1917-18,' *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, vol. 94 (370), Autumn 2016, pp. 225-224.

Wilson and Lord French to consider Britain's strategic options for 1918. Little wonder, then, that the Prime Minister resisted GHQ's enthusiasm for another major offensive on the Western Front in the coming year. Wilson's alternative strategy, a defensive posture, with the possibility of limited operations elsewhere, was supported by Churchill, Minister of Munitions.[17] He recommended that recruitment to the military be kept low with 'all our available labour, especially our skilled labour, being employed on shipbuilding, artillery and aeroplanes.'[18] At the SWC Wilson oversaw the creation of several policy studies into the manufacture of military materiel, particularly aircraft, tanks and heavy artillery.

At the end of 1917 the War Office and the Army Council, and GHQ, faced an uphill task persuading the Prime Minister of the need for yet more men for the Western Front. With Wilson at Versailles Lloyd George had a soldier he could communicate with on friendly terms; one who appeared to be sympathetic to at least some of his strategic views.[19] Wilson was acutely aware of the manpower crisis. In October 1917, while compiling his 'State Paper' for the War Cabinet, Macdonogh, the DMI, gave him the 'startling' casualty lists:

> Since July 1st 1916 up to Oct 10th last [,] Haig has lost 900,000 men in killed and missing[,]...it appears that our average monthly wastage in France is 50,000 and an optimistic estimate of intake is 30,000[,] though 25,000 will probably be more the mark. This shows a monthly deficit of 20,000 - 25,000. So that a year hence …we shall be 240,000 – 300,000 men deficient.[20]

[17] CAB 27/8, WP 61, p. 8.
[18] TNA CAB 24/30/36, 'Munitions Possibilities of 1918', memorandum to the War Cabinet, 21 October 1918.
[19] French, *Strategy*, p. 164; Woodward, *Lloyd George*, p. 221.
[20] Wilson diary, 16 October 1917.

The War Office casualty report for the period 1 January to 30 November 1917 showed 753,147 men killed, wounded, missing or taken prisoner, with 690,218 of those in France and Flanders.[21] Rather than helping Haig and Robertson's case for more men, the statistics served to harden the War Cabinet's resolve to take control of manpower priorities. On the way to the Rapallo Conference, Lloyd George told Wilson that:

> Haig really did talk the most awful nonsense about his front, said he was getting on splendidly that he would have done more if more men and guns had been sent to him - this infuriated LG - that no other front mattered and so on and so on. LG also let himself go about Robertson's pig-headedness and narrowness of vision, and said he was going to expose, on Friday in his speech in Paris, all our gross strategical blunders![22]

By late 1917 Lloyd George and his colleagues viewed the assessments of Robertson and Haig with scepticism. The case for 'business as usual' was weakened by a series of conflicting and contradictory reports from the military leadership. The Prime Minister confided in Wilson that he was 'determined to stop this "butchering" on the West front and I am clear that as we cannot hope to walk over the Boches by dint of numbers we must develop their means.'[23] Derby told the War Cabinet that 'without a great legislative or administrative effort' to obtain men, the British would be '40 per cent below their present establishment' by the end of March 1918. 'Very grave reports' had been received from Haig and there was no longer

[21] TNA CAB 24/34/66, War Cabinet, 'Casualties in the Expeditionary Forces, 1 January to November 1917'.
[22] Wilson diary, 5 November 1917; in fact, Lloyd George made his controversial speech about the SWC and the need for greater Allied co-operation in Paris on 12 November, *The Times*, 13 November 1917, pp. 7-8; French, *Strategy*, p. 165.
[23] Wilson diary, 27 November 1917.

any question of Britain deciding what next year's military policy would be 'as that will be decided by the Germans'. The BEF was 100,000 men below its proper strength and 'so far from there being any question of our breaking through the Germans, it was a question of whether we could prevent the Germans breaking through us.'[24] Wilson's reaction was that: 'It really is intolerable that one day he [Haig] should ask for 45,000 men before March 31st and the next day say he must reduce by 15 Divisions.'[25] Considering the fact that in October the C-in-C had been proposing a major British offensive in 1918, Hankey thought his concerns were:

> …absolutely inconsistent with Haig's continued reports of bad German moral[e]…War Office figures and statements are utterly unreliable, and their facts are twisted to support their arguments. If they want men they make out that they can hardly hold the line … If they want to do an offensive they make out that the enemy is exhausted and demoralised and that they [the British] have lots of men.[26]

Hankey's dismay was understandable. The previous day, GHQ had issued a manpower assessment for the Western Front which showed 168.5 Allied divisions (excluding those in Italy or on their way there) facing 150 German divisions.[27] In response to Haig's plea, the government established a 'Cabinet Committee on Man-Power'.[28] Its conclusions placed the BEF at the bottom of the list of manpower priorities for 1918. Matters were made worse for Haig when Macdonogh estimated that on the Western Front the French and British had '1,200,000 more men in the field

[24] TNA CAB 24/4/67, War Cabinet, 6 December 1917.
[25] Wilson diary, 29 November 1917.
[26] Hankey diary, 6 December 1917, in Roskill, *Hankey*, p. 469.
[27] TNA CAB 24/34/70, 'Strength of Allied and Enemy Forces on 5 December 1917: Western Front', report to War Cabinet, 5 December 1917; the report showed manpower numbers as 1,596,400 Allied troops opposed by 1,177,700 Germans.
[28] TNA CAB 24/4/67; Beckett et. al., *British Army*, pp. 348-9.

than the Germans'. Even if the enemy transferred all his troops from the east they would still be in a minority and thus: 'In these circumstances the Prime Minister was unable to understand the rather alarmist tone as to the situation which had recently been exhibited.'[29] Macready, the AG, told Wilson that the result had been 'three days of Armageddon' at the Man-Power Committee:

> This, and the fact that GHQ France, in October wrote a Memorandum… saying in effect that the Germans were worn out, and could only bring a limited number of Divisions over from the Russian front, has naturally given the civilians the impression that we so outnumber the Boche that the need for men is not urgent.

Macready assumed that Charteris had written the report and noted the figures included 'people like Belgians, Portuguese, and Italians, none of whom would stand up against the Boche.' [30]

Hankey summed up the political mood: 'Russia practically out of the war; Italy very much under the weather after [her] defeat; France unreliable; the USA not nearly ready; our own man-power much exhausted by the senseless hammerings of the last three years; and great demands for labour…'[31] In this climate it is unsurprising that the findings of the Man-Power Committee 'represented a wholesale defeat for the War Office and a victory for Lloyd George'.[32] It gave manpower priority to the Royal and Merchant navies, essential as these were in sustaining Britain during what was expected to be a year of retrenchment; it was vital to be able to

[29] TNA CAB 24/4/67.
[30] Wilson papers, (2/2A/1), Macready to Wilson, 13 December 1917.
[31] Hankey diary, 16 December 1917, in Roskill, *Hankey*, p. 470.
[32] French, *Strategy*, p. 185.

transport both men and equipment from the US to make a decisive difference in 1919. The Army came last, after shipbuilding, aircraft, tank and food production. It would receive just 100,000 'Category A' men in the year, rather than the 600,000 the War Office estimated was needed. The report recommended that front-line divisions be reduced, from 12 battalions (plus one Pioneer battalion), to nine battalions (plus one Pioneer battalion).[33] Haig and Robertson had feared this policy, which had already been carried out by the German and French armies, since early in the year.[34] In December 1917 Foch and Weygand tried to persuade Wilson and Milner of the merits of such a change as an alternative to reducing the number of operational British divisions on the Western Front: 'He [Foch] wants the defence made secure before studying plans of offence. He wants our divisions turned into 9 Batt[alion]s also the Belgian and the Italians.' The British Secretariat at Versailles came out marginally in favour of the change.[35] Wilson discussed the suggestion with Kiggell, who was 'absolutely opposed' and said that Haig would 'rather abolish 15 Div[ision]s altogether than keep his 62 at 9 Batt[alion]s. I thought Kigg's arguments were wholly unconvincing.'[36] Wilson's unwillingness to jump instantly to the French tune disappointed Foch who reportedly told Spears

[33] TNA, CAB 24/4/36, 'Final Revise of the Draft Report on Man-Power', 1 March 1918, with covering note by Hankey, 2 April 1918; (the initial draft report was completed on 9 January 1918); minutes of the meetings of the Cabinet Committee on Man-Power are at TNA CAB 27/14; see also Simon Justice, 'Vanishing Battalions: The Nature, Impact and Implications of British Infantry Reorganization prior to the German Spring Offensives of 1918', in Michael LoCicero, Ross Mahoney, Ross, & Stuart Mitchell, (eds.), *A Military Transformed?: Adaptation and Innovation in the British Military, 1792-1945* (Solihull: Helion, 2014), pp. 157-173.
[34] LHCMA, Robertson papers, Robertson to Haig, (7/7/5), 13 February 1917.
[35] TNA, CAB 25/120/7, SWC, British Secretariat, Minutes and Papers, 'Organisation of a Division with 9 Battalions instead of 13', 7 December 1918.
[36] Wilson diary, 6 December 1917.

that: 'General Wilson was not as good as he had thought he was, and required a great deal of close support and help; were it not for General Weygand Versailles would be in a bad way...'[37] Resigned to the reduction, Wilson told Lloyd George that if 'our man-power conditions – and I understand this is the case - make it necessary either to abolish Divisions or change from 12 to 9 then I would not hesitate for a minute but would change to 9'.[38]

Macready tipped off Wilson that the implications of Man-Power Committee's conclusions made:

> …dreadful reading, and amounts to this, that we must reduce our 56 Div[ision]s from 12 to 9 Batt[alion]s; that in July we shall have to reduce from 56 [divisions] to 44, and next winter from 44 to 30. This is simply damnable.
> I wrote Milner a long letter in which I told him that if these figures are true then we must do one of two things:
> (a) get more men
> (b) make peace now
> Personally I rejected (b) as being cowardly and fatal in every way at least until we were strained to breaking point, but I saw no difficulty in (a) which mean real conscription in England and in Ireland, neither of which things have any terror for me compared with Peace. But I confess all this frightens me, and if Macready's figures prove true and if LG won't take drastic action then I will.[39]

It is unclear what the final sentence meant; there is no reference to any such 'drastic action' in subsequent diary entries, and the most likely explanation is that (as was his wont) Wilson was letting off steam in private. More men were needed, which would:

> …mean something much more drastic than what we have done, as yet, in England and of course it will mean Ireland...Our war game

[37] WO 106/407, (LSO. 177), Spears to Maurice, 22 December 1917.
[38] PA, Lloyd George papers, (47/7/5), Wilson to Lloyd George, 23 December 1917 (original emphasis).
[39] Wilson diary, 4 January 1918, (original emphasis).

> here has shown us that we can look forward with an easy mind if we have 56 Div[ision]s each of 9 Batt[alion]s and 1 Pioneer Batt[alion] but the war game also shows that a reduction from 56 to 44 would be a terrible gamble and a further reduction to 30 would bring us certain disaster.[40]

He was so concerned that the next day he sent Amery to London.[41] The mission backfired when Hankey accused Wilson's emissary of going behind his back to the Prime Minister. These were fraught times, and Wilson's tendency for dramatic interventions sometimes landed him in hot water with his colleagues.[42] As discussed earlier, Amery was a much more independent figure than either Hankey or Wilson gave credit for. After himself, his greatest loyalty was to Milner.

The response of the Army Council to the Committee's recommendations confirmed Wilson's fears. Dominated by Derby and Robertson, it noted 'with grave concern' that only 100,000 Category A men were going to be allocated to the Army, as opposed to the 615,000 estimated to be needed to keep up to strength. A defensive policy was likely to be as costly as an offensive one. The Army Council thought reducing battalion strength to nine per division was 'very undesirable'. They pointed out that the French had adopted a similar policy only because of lack of men. The Council appeared to have overlooked the fact that this was exactly why the Committee was making a similar recommendation. They also opposed the creation of a 'mobile reserve' for lack of men and calculated that the Army,

[40] Wilson papers, (2/11/6), Wilson to Milner, 4 January 1918.
[41] Wilson diary, 5 January 1918.
[42] Hankey diary, 9 January 1918, in Roskill, *Hankey*, p. 479; Amery diary, 9 and 10 January 1918, in Barnes and Nicholson (eds.), *Amery Diaries*, (vol. I), pp. 198-9.

in all theatres, would be 264,000 below establishment by 1 January 1919. The 52 divisions in France in 1917 would be reduced to 42, with five of them currently in Italy, leaving 37 on the Western Front – a reduction of 25% on a year earlier. The Army Council believed the Committee had 'failed to realise the perilous situation' regarding drafts. There was 'every prospect of heavy fighting on the Western front from February onwards' and even if they withstood the initial assault, forces might become so exhausted that they would be 'incapable of continuing the struggle'. Accepting the recommendations would amount to 'taking an unnecessarily grave risk of losing the war and sacrificing to no purpose the British Army on the Western front.'[43] Nonetheless, accepting the inevitable, the next day (10 January 1918) the War Office ordered Haig to reduce his British (but not Dominion) divisions to nine battalions.[44] A situation Derby had long feared had come to pass. It appeared, he had said the previous June, as if the Army was provided with men 'only after all other needs of the Nation have been cared for' and had warned that the strength of the Army would 'continue rapidly to diminish, and, so far as military operations are concerned, our chances of winning the war will be correspondingly reduced.'[45]

Ironically, Haig himself put paid to any lingering doubts the politicians might have had about the military's demands for more troops, at a War

[43] TNA, CAB 24/38/66, 'Memorandum by the Military Members of the Army Council on the draft Report of the War Cabinet Committee on Man-Power', 9 January 1918.
[44] French, *Strategy*, p. 186.
[45] TNA, CAB 24/15/66, 'The Position and Prospects of Recruiting', Derby to War Cabinet, 7 June 1917.

Cabinet meeting two days before the draft report of the Man-Power Committee. Robertson reported that there were 28 more German divisions on the Western Front than a year earlier, thanks to drafts from the east. The enemy was reorganising and now had 'the character of an offensive force'.[46] Carson asked Haig whether 'it would be possible for the Germans to break through our lines in France in the near future.' The C-in-C said he had 'every confidence that the British Army would hold its own, as it had always done in the past'.[47] Haig was given the opportunity to clarify when Bonar Law, a 'friend' of the soldiers, asked: 'If you were a German Commander, would you think there was sufficient chance of a smashing offensive to justify incurring the losses which would be entailed?' Haig said he thought attacks of limited scope were 'more probable' than one on a large scale which would be 'very costly'. The German manpower situation 'did not seem very satisfactory', but the Allies must, nonetheless, 'expect to be seriously attacked'. He was making preparations and while likely to lose ground 'he felt confident of holding his front provided his Divisions were maintained at proper strength.'[48] This was exactly the kind of answer the politicians wanted to hear. While it makes sense to blame the Field Marshal's 'inarticulacy' for this blunder, this performance was a particularly sustained example of the malady.[49] Robertson was horrified, and after the meeting sent Haig a note urging him to clarify his remarks. 'For months past', Wully wrote:

> …we have been trying to get more men for the Army. The Cabinet find difficulty in getting the men and therefore make every excuse

[46] TNA CAB 23/5/8, War Cabinet, 7 January 1918.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Sheffield, *The Chief*, p. 260.

> for not providing them…For a long time past they have been trying to persuade me to say that the Germans may not attack us this year. Unfortunately you gave as your opinion this morning that they would not do so, and I noticed, as also did Lord Derby, that they jumped at the statement.

Robertson's note ended with the handwritten explanation that Carson's questions had been designed to give Haig the opportunity to 'rub in' the message about the need to keep the BEF up to establishment: 'Of course you do not quite understand these fellows as well as I do.'[50] In fairness to Haig, he made several references to the effect that it was essential to maintain his forces and predicted monthly losses of 100,000 in the event of a German offensive.[51] Despite submitting a note of clarification, in which he stressed the need to keep the BEF up to strength, the damage had been done.[52] Haig compounded matters when he told Lloyd George and Derby that he doubted the Germans would attempt a breakthrough.[53] Wilson learned of the incident from Robertson who was a 'good deal flustered'. The CIGS informed him that the manpower report had allocated only 100,000 men for 1918, 'this of course would settle the war.' Robertson was visiting the front and appeared to have mis-remembered the totality of Haig's message: 'He said that the politicians were taking increasing charge in military affairs and he called Haig a fool because on

[50] LHCMA, Robertson papers, Robertson to Haig, (7/7/77), January 1918.
[51] In his diary for this date, Haig noted that 'In my opinion, the best defence would be to continue our offensive in Flanders, because we would then retain the initiative and attract the German Reserves against us', NLS, Haig (manuscript) diary, Acc. 3155/97, 7 January 1918. He did not make this point at the War Cabinet meeting
[52] TNA, CAB 24/38/69, Haig to CIGS, 8 January 1918; Robertson later wrote that when Lloyd George saw Haig's note he 'tossed it aside with the remark that is was entirely inconsistent with what Sir Douglas had said verbally', Field Marshal Sir William Robertson, *Soldiers and Statesmen* (London: Cassell, 1926), p. 324.
[53] Haig diary, 9 January 1918, in Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig: Diaries*, pp. 370-1 and Beckett et. al., *British Army*, p. 350.

Mon[day] last Haig had told the War Cabinet that he could hold the line and never insisted on the necessity of being supported with men. Haig really is incurably stupid.'[54] Wilson was further dismayed by the C-in-C's Dispatch for the campaigns of 1917 which included the claim: 'In the operations of Arras, Messines, Lens and Ypres as many as 131 German divisions have been engaged and defeated by less than half that number of British divisions.' Haig added another sentence, weakening the impact of his warnings about the increasing German threat: 'The addition of strength which the enemy has obtained, or may yet obtain, from events in Russia and Italy has already been largely discounted, and the ultimate destruction of the enemy's field force has been brought appreciably nearer.'[55] 'What a lie!' Wilson wrote in his diary.[56]

IRELAND

The German Spring Offensive, which began on 21 March 1918, brought into focus the manpower issues discussed here. The BEF's shortage of troops was exposed as casualties mounted, the recent attempts to formalise Anglo-French co-operation remained to a large extent *ad hoc*, and the AEF was green and not ready to help in the defence of the British line. The War Cabinet met almost daily with Wilson, now in the post of CIGS, having succeeded Robertson in February, in attendance. The desperate need for manpower led the government finally to adopt a policy it had avoided, and which Wilson had doggedly advocated, since the war

[54] Wilson diary, 9 January 1918.
[55] 'The Campaigns of 1917', in J.H. Boraston, (ed.), *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches (December 1915-April 1919)* (London: J.M. Dent, 1919) p. 135.
[56] Wilson diary, 9 January 1918.

began: compulsory military conscription for Ireland. Geddes had estimated that there might be a manpower pool of 150,000 available in Ireland. Nonetheless, he had rejected conscription as unworkable in view of 'the great political difficulties involved and the meagre results to be anticipated' in conscripting a reluctant population.[57] Wilson disagreed.[58] Unbowed by Geddes's recommendation, on 31 January he 'had a serious talk with LG about Ireland and his theory is that if we put conscription on Ireland, not only would we have trouble in Ireland but we would have trouble with the English Unions, with the Colonies and with America, and therefore this was out of the question.'[59] Wilson's chance came with the desperation engendered by the German Spring Offensive. His inability to see the evident risks associated with such a policy is a notable departure for one normally so politically astute. As his latest biographer observed, Ireland was 'a political blind-spot' for Wilson.[60]

On 23 March, he spent five hours with Lloyd George: 'I insisted on the importance of taking a long, broad view of the future, of conscription of everyone up to 50, and, of course, on Ireland. I think I did good, and Winston [Churchill] helped like a man…Milner disappointing.'[61] Geddes was urged to tap 'such new sources as still remain' because the situation 'might afford exceptional opportunity for overcoming difficulties that had

[57] TNA, CAB 24/4/36, 'Final Revise of the Draft Report on Man-Power', 1 March 1918, (paras. 62-64).
[58] Jeffery, *Wilson*, p. 197.
[59] Wilson diary, 31 January 1918.
[60] Jeffery, *Wilson*, p. 197.
[61] Wilson diary, 23 March 1918.

hitherto proved insurmountable.'[62] The next day Milner's view had changed; he was now 'nearly as strong as I was for the necessity of *levée en masse* in England & Ireland which could be carried out with real conscription.' Over dinner with the Prime Minister and Churchill: 'Winston backed me up when I pressed Lloyd George hard to really conscript this country & Ireland…I want Lloyd George to summon Parliament, conscript up to 50 years of age, & include Ireland. I am not sure he sees the gravity of the situation yet.' [63] The government's dilemma has been summed up thus: 'Unless the British army could be provided with manpower to rebuild the shattered divisions, the BEF would cease to exist. In these circumstances the War Cabinet took the most contentious decision of the war; they extended compulsory military service to Ireland.'[64] On 25 March, a 'wildly optimistic' Johnnie French, a fellow Irishman, said he strongly believed that if troops in Ireland were augmented 'to maintain order' it would be possible to carry out a recruitment policy.[65] The War Cabinet met twice on 27 March, the day after Foch had been appointed 'Generalissimo' at Doullens.[66] Wilson outlined the parlous state of the BEF. There were signs the Germans were preparing another attack and were just 25km from the important rail junction at Amiens. The British Fifth Army 'could no longer be regarded as a fighting unit,' and had been placed under the French who were sending reinforcements. Wilson said there were 193

[62] TNA, CAB 23/5/63, War Cabinet, 23 March 1918.
[63] Wilson diary, 24 March 1918.
[64] Adrian Gregory, '"You might as well recruit Germans": British public opinion and the decision to conscript the Irish in 1918', in Adrian Gregory and Senia Pašeta, *Ireland and the Great War: 'A War to Unite Us All'?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) p. 113.
[65] Ibid., p. 117; TNA, CAB 25/5/64, War Cabinet minutes, 25 March 1918.
[66] See p. 228.

German divisions on the Western Front; 70 had been involved in the recent fighting with an estimated 31 in reserve. To make matters worse, the AEF C-in-C General John Pershing had refused a plea from Rawlinson (now Britain's PMR) to put American battalions into British divisions. It was agreed that Lloyd George, to make Pershing reconsider, would send a 'strongly worded' telegram 'with a view to ultimate publication' to the US President Woodrow Wilson.[67] It made no difference.

The meeting then heard from the government's senior representatives in Ireland. The C-in-C Ireland, Lieutenant-General Sir Bryan Mahon, was in favour of the *principle* of conscription but predicted 'considerable trouble' if implemented. Brigadier-General Sir Joseph Byrne, head of the Royal Irish Constabulary, was in no doubt that compulsory military service 'would be a mistake' and predicted riots. The most vehement opposition came from Ireland's most senior political officer, the Unionist MP and Chief Secretary for Ireland, Henry E. Duke, who expressed grave doubts. The Cabinet, having discussed further relaxation of age limits to extend recruitment in the rest of Britain, faced a profound dilemma. How could it exempt Ireland yet bear down still harder on the rest of the country?[68] At the day's second meeting, Duke was adamant that conscription would unite Catholics and Protestants against the government and 'we might almost as well recruit Germans.'[69] Despite the opposition of three key government-appointed figures who, arguably, knew the current political climate in Ireland better

[67] TNA, CAB 25/5/66, War Cabinet, 27 March 1918.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.

than Wilson, French and Derby, the Cabinet decided to go ahead and impose conscription.[70] Gregory has argued that the government had little expectation of recruiting large numbers of Irishmen but acted to avoid charges of treating one part of Britain differently.[71] This work, while acknowledging the strength of this position, argues that Wilson also played an important role. Since November he had seen the Prime Minister and/or Milner, the most influential Unionist in the government, almost daily. His diary contains numerous references to speaking to both men, and others, about the 'need' to conscript Ireland. Having been instrumental in Wilson's appointment as CIGS, the Prime Minister backed his principal military adviser. In the event, while the legislation was enacted, conscription was never actually imposed on Ireland; once the spring crisis had passed the notion was shelved, much to Wilson's displeasure.[72]

TAKING OVER FRENCH LINE

One of the most intractable problems Wilson faced at Versailles concerned the extension of the British line to relieve the hard-pressed French. The issue had been on the Allies' agenda since early 1915.[73] Lloyd George had effectively 'kicked the issue into the long grass' on 7 November 1917 at the inaugural meeting of the SWC, by insisting that a joined-up Allied strategic plan for 1918 had to be agreed first. French pressure increased when Clemenceau became Prime Minister nine days

[70] The Military Service Act (No. 2) became law in April 1918; as well as extending conscription to Ireland it removed a number of other exemptions and increased the age limit of recruits to 50.
[71] Gregory, "Recruit Germans", p. 114.
[72] Wilson diary, 21 June 1918.
[73] Callwell, *Wilson*, (vol. II), p. 44.

later. Wilson was heavily involved in trying to find a solution acceptable to both allies. For much of the winter he acted as a conduit for British policy and a lightning rod against French impatience. His friendship with Foch, and his more nuanced relationship with Clemenceau, helped preserve fragile Anglo-French relations during a crucial period, and both merit further study.

While 'Chief of British Mission to the French Army' in 1917, Wilson had wanted to ensure Britain did all it could to bolster France's commitment to the war.[74] The failure of Nivelle's offensive saw him replaced in mid-May as C-in-C by Pétain.[75] Wilson recorded the 'disquieting' news that an attack, in support of the imminent British offensive against the Messines Ridge south of Ypres, had been cancelled 'because the moral[e] of the French troops is such that it cannot be carried out…if the French continue to feel the strain like this, we must expect them to ask us to take over some more line.'[76] Macdonogh reported 'serious trouble, practically amounting to mutiny, in a number of French regiments... It was hoped that this disaffection would be set right in five or six days.'[77] As the British officer closest to the French high command, Wilson 'expressed grave doubts as to whether we could count on the continued resistance of the French army and nation' before US forces were able to make a difference,

[74] Jeffery, *Wilson*, p. 188; Wilson took up his post on 17 March and stepped down in late June 1917.
[75] Foch was appointed French Chief of Staff on 15 May, two days after Pétain became C-in-C, Greenhalgh, *Foch*, pp. 225-226.
[76] Wilson diary, 4 June 1917.
[77] TNA, CAB 23/3/3, War Cabinet Minutes 6 June 1917; for the most recent assessment of the French 'Mutinies' of 1917 see Greenhalgh, *French Army*, pp. 201-216.

something he expected to take 12 to 18 months. The War Cabinet understood that Pétain 'could not absolutely rely on his men'. Wilson could not confirm an incident 'amounting almost to mutiny', but there was a 'good deal of unrest'. Soon the British would be asked 'to take over a further section of the line on the Western Front. A case …which it would be very difficult to resist.' Macdonogh agreed that there was 'a strong feeling in France that we ought to hold more of the line'. Wilson said the French were 'good comrades' who would not press their case while the Messines offensive, and the actions which were to follow, were in progress.[78]

Wilson's views carried weight. He had been in regular contact with Lloyd George since joining *GQG*.[79] The issue lay dormant in the latter half of 1917 but re-emerged when it became clear that Third Ypres had failed to meet its objectives. Despite British losses, the French once again pressed the BEF to take over more line. On 6 December Wilson, as British PMR, and Milner met Foch and Weygand:

> He [Foch] does not yet realise how badly we are off in recruiting though I let him know rather vaguely that we were in straits... He was angry with Haig for the waste of life and upset at Passchendaele and at Cambrai, and he said that these individual efforts were fatal and upset the general plan, as for example our taking over French line which now we appeared incapable of doing.[80]

[78] TNA, CAB 23/16/1, War Cabinet, 8 June 1917; Hankey considered Wilson's report on the morale of the French army of such 'very great secrecy' that he restricted it to one manuscript copy.
[79] Woodward, *Lloyd George*, p. 196.
[80] Wilson diary, 6 December 1917, and *passim*.

Wilson canvassed views in a bid to resolve the issue. Esher told him Clemenceau 'was furious with the English' and he went to see him at once. At a 'memorable and stormy meeting':

> The old man was difficult. He raged against the English and then fastened on Haig and in a minor degree on Robertson. He told of the [French] War Cabinet this morning in which Pétain said that unless he was given 200,000-300,000 men from the interior for some works to dig backward trenches and put up wire and unless we (English) took over the line to Berry-au-Bac ... he - Pétain - would not be responsible for his front. This, said Clemenceau, had a very great effect on the War Cabinet.
> Clemenceau then undertook to
> (a) Get the 200,000 men from the Interior
> (b) Make the English take over to Berry-au-Bac
> OR
> (c) Resign

Wilson employed his diplomatic skills and eventually 'I got the old man a little quieter'. Despite the histrionics, Wilson had been struck by the French Première's argument: 'When all allowance is made it is perfectly clear that we must handle this business of relief and of the future with the greatest care and consideration…Before leaving old C I told him to submit the whole case to Versailles [in other words to Wilson and the other PMRs] and not to London and I think he will.'[81] Haig thought it 'quite impossible for us to take over any line, that our troops are exhausted, that we have been fighting all the summer and up to now, that the French have done nothing, that we have sent 5 Div[ision]s to Italy, that DH won't take over more than to the Oise. All this will be very difficult.'[82] Wilson sent Amery to London 'with a rather anxious message' to recruit Milner's, and the Prime Minister's, support.[83] He made another visit to Haig, who was 'very nice to

[81] Wilson diary, 13 December 1917; Hankey, *Supreme Command* (vol. II), p. 753.
[82] Wilson diary, 14 December 1917.
[83] BLO, Milner diary, 15 December 1917.

me… I begged DH and more particularly Kiggell with whom I can speak with greater freedom, to look at the question of the relief of the French from as broad a standpoint as they could, as otherwise there would be trouble, but I did not make much impression, I am afraid.' Nonetheless, Wilson had convinced the Prime Minister, who ordered Haig and Robertson to 'lay the case before Versailles. I will get the French to do ditto. I am sure it is wise.'[84] Robertson's response was to tell Wilson that: 'This extension of the line is a d___d nuisance. Haig certainly ought not to go anywhere near Berry-au-Bac.' Robertson said the BEF was 'played out' and needed rest.[85] Haig and Robertson both resented the interference of Versailles. Haig preferred to deal directly with his French opposite number; a practice he maintained well into 1918. Haig and Pétain met but failed to agree a way forward. Haig, who apparently arrived at the meeting with 'no papers or figures', said he could extend his line by no more than two divisions by mid-January 1918 'and under no circ[umstance]s could he do any more! It is clear that my talk did not do any good,' wrote Wilson.[86]

Having secured Lloyd George's support, Wilson persuaded Clemenceau to let the PMRs decide this important issue provided that 'he was prepared to accept the Versailles decision as final. He asked who Versailles was and answered it himself by saying "Nous: Wilson" he then thought a little and finally said "Yes I will agree to that proposal."' Clemenceau then

[84] Wilson papers, (2/11/3), Wilson to Milner, 16 December 1917.
[85] Ibid., (2/1A/6), Robertson to Wilson, 16 December 1917.
[86] Wilson diary, 17 December 1917; Haig diary, 17 December 1917, in Robert Blake, *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig: 1914-1919* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1952), p. 273.

asked Wilson to dictate what he wanted to say: 'This is an epoch making step because it really calls Versailles into being as the Supreme advisory (military) body and as the Supreme executive body also. I told the Tiger that I thought well of him and liked him and he said he liked me too!' Unsurprisingly, considering he knew Wilson was sympathetic to the French request for British help, Clemenceau 'said that when first he spoke to me ... he was hostile to Versailles but that now he admitted that he was entirely wrong.'[87] Wilson thought the first report Haig submitted to Versailles was a 'feeble defence' of his position and asked for 'much more information.'[88] Wilson suggested Haig send two officers to Versailles to help him develop the British case, 'as otherwise, I am afraid we shall be swamped.' Haig refused, saying there was so much information it would be easier to examine it at GHQ; in other words, the C-in-C was not ready to dance to Wilson's tune.[89] Wilson continued to worry away at the problem, including working on the issue on Christmas Day.[90]

The PMRs produced their recommendation in Joint Note 10 (JN10), a compromise extending the British line 14 miles beyond Barisis to the left bank of the River Ailette, between the Ailette and the Laon-Soissons road 'the exact points to be fixed by the Commanders-in-Chief.'[91] The note also allowed for the British to support the French if an attack further south

[87] Wilson diary, 17 December 1917.
[88] Ibid., 18 December 1917.
[89] Wilson papers, (2/7A/1) Wilson to Haig, 18 December 1917, and (2/7A/2) Operations, GHQ to Wilson, 19 December 1917.
[90] Wilson diary, 25 December 1917.
[91] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 10,10 January 1918; the extension proposed was, roughly, the equivalent of 2.5 British divisions, Callwell, *Wilson*, (vol. II), *n*. p. 57.

meant they had to move forces there. The French would support the British if the latter were attacked and the junction between the Allied armies was threatened. In a detail of significance for the future, it excluded the prospect of French forces moving deeper into the British sector, for example around Ypres, or *vice-versa*. The recommended extension fell well short of Berry-au-Bac, the French preference, and Weygand made clear he thought it inadequate, pointing out that the French held 520 kilometres of line, a burden 'which was more than they could bear.'[92] As the date for the Third Session of the SWC approached it was far from certain that the C-in-Cs would support the Wilson compromise. Robertson warned Haig that while 'the Versailles people' were no doubt doing their best 'they cannot help being a probable source of mischief unless we responsible people have made up our minds on all points *beforehand* and are in accord with the French.' Wully recommended that he and Haig confer with Foch, Pétain and Pershing, beforehand to be 'in a position to get done what you want done without the interference of the young men at Versailles.' The PMR's compromise had been reached as a result of Wilson's war games 'their panacea for everything.' It would all be 'very funny if it were not such a nuisance, not to say serious.'[93] Wilson was not the only senior soldier who could play a political game.

[92] TNA, CAB 25/120, 'Supreme War Council: Papers and Minutes,' Minutes of a meeting of the Military Representatives, 7 January 1918.
[93] LHCMA, Robertson papers, Robertson to Haig, (7/7/78), 12 January 1918, (original emphasis).

While Robertson and Haig considered their tactics for the SWC conference, Lloyd George continued to cast around for ways to limit their power. On 13 January Amery asked Wilson's opinion 'of a proposal to make Joffre C-in-C and me as his CGS!'[94] Wilson apparently put a stop to this short-lived notion by telling Milner 'that in my opinion we cannot have a Generalissimo but that if this was tried it would make it still more impossible if he was given a foreigner for Chief of Staff.'[95] The Prime Minister's anxiety over the issue of the French line is illustrated by the fact that he wrote to Wilson on consecutive days asking why the PMRs had settled on the Laon-Soissons road compromise: 'Another wire from LG wanting more information about our taking over the line. It is clear that he finds it difficult to get his Cabinet to agree to Versailles and go against Haig and Robertson.'[96] On the same day Wilson saw Foch who was allegedly:

> …rather contemptuous of LG who he says seems afraid of everyone, of Haig and Robertson, of the Trades Unions and of the Irish. Then he told me of Robertson's little plot to square [sic] the pitch of Versailles. R is trying to get up a meeting of Haig, Pétain, Pershing, Foch and himself before the Versailles meeting so as to be able to say at that meeting that all was already settled! Foch much amused.[97]

Wilson, who warned Milner that the French were 'getting cross' about the unresolved issue, had begun to see it as a personal contest between himself and the Haig-Robertson alliance.[98] Lloyd George had to decide

[94] Wilson diary, 13 January 1918.
[95] Ibid., 14 January 1918; see also p. 218.
[96] Ibid., 17, 18 January 1918.
[97] Ibid., 18 January 1918.
[98] Ibid., 20 January 1918.

whom to support.[99] In the end, he backed Wilson, but then did nothing to ensure Haig and Pétain obeyed. Once in the role of CIGS, such apparently black and white issues took on a more nuanced hue for Wilson himself.

When the heads of the British, Italian and French governments met for the first meeting of the Third Session of the SWC on 30 January, Haig and Pétain had not resolved their differences. Ten days earlier Haig had reported to Robertson that relations with Pétain were 'good'. The CIGS noted: 'I only hope that he [Pétain] will represent them as being equally good when we come to the discussion of the extension of the front. I daresay this will be difficult for him because his politicians wish for you to take over more front.'[100] Robertson's fears were well founded. Wilson recorded that Haig agreed to his idea of the Allies taking an active defensive position in 1918 and to the principle of creating a reserve force: 'He went on to show that by the autumn his present 57 Div[ision]s would be reduced to 30! Such was the state of the manpower; he was also far from nice to the Americans saying they would be no use till 1919.' Then, in order to illustrate how vital it was that the BEF took on more French line, Pétain 'showed that he would have to reduce by the autumn to the tune of 25 Divisions <u>if he had no fighting</u> and by 50 divisions if he had some fighting.' According to Wilson:

> This was all too much for LG who said he was absolutely dumbfounded that 77 Divisions were going to be wiped off in this

[99] Wilson diary, 23 January 1918.
[100] LHCMA, Robertson papers, Haig to Robertson, (7/7/81), 20 January 1918, and (7/7/82), Robertson to Haig, 21 January 1918.

> manner & that he really could not accept these figures …all this is extraordinary.
> About three weeks ago Haig gave evidence before the War Cabinet & said that if he was the German C-in-C he would not attack because it would be so hopeless an undertaking. A week later (about a fortnight ago) he wrote an official letter to say that in view of the critical situation which now existed the Divisions now in Italy must be at once brought back. Yesterday Haig told us that he was not afraid of any Boche attack. Today Haig told us that he was going to lose 27 Divisions & the position is very critical. The man is a FOOL. The real fact seems to me to be that if we allow the conduct of the war to rest in the hands of Haig, Pétain & Robertson we shall be beaten by the Boches. This is a serious state of affairs, & I think LG must take some action.[101]

This 'absolutely desperate picture of the future manpower situation' was painted 'in an apparent attempt to frighten Lloyd George away from his "Eastern" schemes and towards increasing the flow of recruits to the British army'.[102] Wilson thought so, and had reminded Robertson of the confusion created by Haig's recent manpower statements:

> I asked him [Robertson] why Haig claimed to have "defeated 131 Divisions" with less than half that number & why - that being so [-] he was now afraid of being attacked by 50 or 60 Divisions & called for the Divisions now in Italy to be returned to him. I asked him also why[,] if Haig claimed to have caused 900,000 casualties with a loss of 600,000 he was now afraid of being knocked out by numbers. Robertson said that all that was "very stupid".[103]

When the first meeting ended, in an effort to get in first and prevent his adversaries combining to carry their point, Wilson advised Lloyd George to keep military advisers out of the meeting until needed:

> As regards Haig and Robertson he does not know what to do. I told Milner later that if it would help them to solve the problem I would resign with pleasure…this Haig is the same man who in his

[101] Wilson diary, 30 January 1918, (original emphasis); TNA, CAB 28/3, War Cabinet, IC (Allied Conferences), Volume III, IC 40 (SWC), '*Procès-Verbal* of the Second Meeting of the Third Session of Supreme War Council,' 30 January 1918.
[102] Woodward, *Lloyd George*, p. 257.
[103] Wilson diary, 28 January 1918.

> Dispatch a month ago claimed to have "defeated 131 Divs with less than half this number!"[104]

Lloyd George watered down Wilson's suggestion. For future meetings, the permanent attendees would be the three prime ministers, three war ministers, four PMRs, Haig and Pétain and Robertson and Foch, as C-in-Cs and CoSs respectively. Clemenceau, also stung by the generals' dire warnings, 'begged me to use all my power to get LG to get more men and I told him I was always working in that direction.'[105]

The conference accepted JN10, and Wilson's proposed extension to the mid-point between Barisis and Berry-au-Bac, but not without a strong rearguard action from Haig with, perhaps surprisingly, his Prime Minister in support. Haig had given a clear warning that, if he 'had to extend his front [beyond Barisis] he could not be responsible for the security of his line'. No doubt conscious of the political fall-out at home if he overruled Haig and disaster ensued, Lloyd George argued that the BEF held a line which covered indispensable ports and valuable coal mines, British troops received far less leave than their French comrades and had 'borne the brunt of the fighting during the past year'. While approving JN10's recommendations 'in principle' Haig won the caveat that the timing and other details would be left to the C-in-Cs.[106] Wilson considered this a

[104] Wilson diary, 30 January 1918.
[105] Ibid., 31 January 1918.
[106] TNA, CAB 28/3, War Cabinet, IC (Allied Conferences), Volume III, IC 43 (SWC), '*Procès-Verbal* of the Fifth Meeting of the Third Session of Supreme War Council,' 2 February 1918.

victory too.[107] In fact, 'not one additional yard of trench beyond Barisis had been taken over' when the German Offensives began on 21 March.[108]

This meeting also created the Strategic Reserve and the EWB to control it.[109] The agreement to place a strategic force under the authority of Versailles represented a significant victory for Wilson and was an important building block in the path to Allied Unity of Command. The fact that no Strategic Reserve was in place when the German Spring Offensive began on 21 March reflected the reality of the manpower crisis facing the British and French, and the limits of Wilson's authority.

THE AEF

One of the main planks of Wilson's strategy document of 20 October 1917 was the need for the Allies to go on the defensive in the west while they waited for the arrival of sufficient American forces to make a difference.[110] Wilson expected a German offensive in the spring, long before the AEF could have a significant impact. As a result, he devoted a lot of time to attempting to persuade the Americans to get their troops into the British line quickly. Wilson, as his diaries reveal, found the task frustrating and, in terms of getting the Americans to do Britain's bidding, ultimately fruitless. His diplomatic skills were tested to their limit, but he was successful in brokering a key agreement between the BEF and AEF.

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[107] Wilson diary, 2 February 1918
[108] Woodward, *Lloyd George*, p. 260, and J.E. Edmonds, *OH: Military Operations France and Belgium 1918* (vol. I), pp. 47-8.
[109] See JN14, p. 215.
[110] CAB 27/8, WP 61, p. 10.

The USA entered the war on 6 April 1917, but it was clear that this knight in shining armour would not be taking the field any time soon. As early as 17 May the General Staff warned the War Cabinet that it was 'clear that we cannot expect a considerable USA Army to be in the field in any theatre of war for a long time to come.' According to Tom Bridges, by this time British liaison officer in Washington, the American military establishment was even more ill-prepared for a modern industrialised war, on an industrial scale, than its British counterpart had been in August 1914. Extensive training was needed before the AEF would be ready.[111] Bridges estimated that by January 1918 the AEF might number no more than 150,000, with only half a million men in theatre by the end of the year.[112] In June, when commenting on the reported unrest in the French Army, Wilson had estimated, correctly, it would take a year to 18 months for the Americans to make a sizeable contribution.[113]

Nonetheless, Allied leaders made US assistance a priority. On 20 November Lloyd George told General Bliss and the American Mission to Britain that the Allies would soon be outnumbered on the Western Front and it was 'a matter of the most urgent and immediate importance that you should send to Europe next year, and as early next year as possible, as

[111] TNA, CAB 24/13/46, 'The present situation in regard to Military Assistance by the United States', General Staff to War Cabinet, 17 May 1917.
[112] Woodward, *Lloyd George*, p. 171. At the end of January 1918, the AEF had a ration strength of 160,000 men in France, or 4.5 divisions; this had risen to 1,944,000 (42 divisions) by November, TNA, CAB 24/70/55, War Cabinet Memorandum, 'Serial No 19, Notes on the American Army,' 13 November 1918.
[113] TNA, CAB 23/16/1, War Cabinet, 8 July 1917.

many men as you can spare, to enable us to withstand a possible German attack…'[114] Yet the build-up of American forces in France was 'painfully slow'.[115] There were one million men under arms in the US but a shipping shortage meant they had 'no way to get them to Europe, [and] their clothing and training were often woefully inadequate.'[116] The AEF cadres which were arriving comprised infantry and machine-gun units, with the French and British expected to provide the artillery and transport essential for self-contained effective fighting divisions. The best way to make immediate use of those AEF units which were available, it seemed to Wilson, Haig and Robertson, was to 'brigade' American battalions into experienced British divisions. There, US soldiers would benefit from the BEF's experience and training, producing an effective force quicker than waiting for fully-formed and independent AEF divisions, corps and armies to assemble in France. The added benefit, from the British perspective, was that when the German offensive came the Americans would be able to fight. It might also stave off the need to reduce the strength of divisions from 12 battalions to nine.

By the beginning of 1918 Wilson was not the only senior Allied officer to be frustrated with what he considered to be the tardy nature of the American response. In the first week of the New Year he emphasised the

[114] TNA, CAB 28/3, War Cabinet, IC (Allied Conferences), Volume III, IC 33, 'Procès-verbal of a Conference of the British War Cabinet and Heads of Government Departments with certain Members of the Mission from the United States of America,' 20 November 1917.
[115] Jeffery, *Wilson*, p. 212.
[116] David R. Woodward, *Trial by Friendship: Anglo-American Relations 1917-1918* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1993), pp. 118-119.

need to speed up the numbers of AEF troops being trained in British units. A few days later, at one of his regular meetings with Clemenceau, they discussed 'the Americans who are dreadfully slow in tumbling to the situation and the urgent need of pushing things along.'[117] Wilson recognised that the key was shipping. Unfortunately, according to Sir Joseph Maclay, Minister of Shipping, the Allied effort was uncoordinated: 'He [Maclay] discussed matters with Pershing this morning and came to the conclusion that Pershing was a fool.' Wilson thought the AEF's commander was 'a beaten man already' and 'worried and out of his depth'.[118] Robertson also lobbied Pershing to do more. He told Wilson he thought he had persuaded him to attach AEF battalions to the British for training: 'The French want the same thing and Pershing sees Pétain tomorrow before giving Robertson his final answer. Clemenceau told R (just as he told me) that he did not care who they went to provided they came over as fast as possible.'[119] Robertson's optimism was misplaced. Wilson saw Clemenceau the following day and found him looking tired and depressed. He said the Americans 'were going to come too late, and that he would be dead very soon.'[120]

Bliss, the recently-appointed American PMR, arrived at Versailles with a contingent of 150 AEF officers on the eve of the Third Session of the SWC. Wilson had a positive, collaborative relationship with Bliss; his diary references to the former US Army CoS suggest none of the tensions he

[117] Wilson diary, 1 and 5 January 1918, (original emphasis).
[118] Ibid., 9 January 1918.
[119] Ibid., 10 January 1918.
[120] Ibid., 11 January 1918.

had with Pershing. One reason may have been Bliss's support for the principle of 'unified command', of which the SWC was precursor.[121] Fearing an imminent German attack, they discussed the Americans sending 150 battalions to France, in addition to the two divisions per month which had already been agreed.[122] Bliss favoured incorporating the additional battalions into British brigades; but Pershing did not. To support his argument, Bliss wanted convincing of the speed with which these forces needed to arrive. Confident of his powers of persuasion, Wilson told Bliss he was sure he could convince him and arranged for a demonstration of his War Game.[123] Bliss and his colleagues 'were immensely struck by the whole thing and Bliss told me he had never dreamt of such a thing and that it was intensely interesting and that we had made out an outstanding case for America helping us with every single man possible in every possible shape.[124]

Wilson's triumph was short-lived. Pershing, Bliss reported, was opposed to incorporating the extra infantry battalions and wanted troops to come over with all the elements of fully-fledged divisions. Wilson noted Pershing's rationale as being 'that the Boches could not attack with sufficient force to break us. As I said to Bliss: "What on earth does Pershing know about it".' He and Robertson 'agreed we must force Pershing's hand by going straight to [President] Wilson.'[125] French and British leaders believed

[121] Tasker H. Bliss, 'The Evolution of the Unified Command', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 1, (2), 1922, pp. 1-31; Cohen, *Supreme Command*, p. 88.
[122] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 12, '1918 Campaign', 21 January 1918.
[123] Wilson diary, 26 January 1918.
[124] Ibid., 27 January 1918.
[125] Ibid., 28 January 1918.

Pershing was the barrier to getting American troops into the line. Pershing's obduracy, they believed, was in stark contrast to his President's uplifting promises of help and support. In fact, soon after the US entered the war Pershing received clear instructions that his force was to be a 'separate and distinct' component in the war, 'the identity of which must be preserved'. Bliss had warned the President on 25 May 1917 that instead of a large and well trained American army, the Franco-British alliance wanted plenty of small units they could feed into their own lines to help resolve their manpower problems, although his position softened once he arrived in France.[126] Pershing did his best to adhere to his government's policy for the rest of the war. Wilson, with varying degrees of success, worked hard to modify it. Ignorant of Pershing's orders, on the eve of the Third Meeting of the SWC Lloyd George hosted a conference to establish what co-operation Britain could expect. Pershing and Bliss faced not only the British Prime Minister but also Milner, Haig, Robertson and Wilson. As far as the latter was concerned, the rough way in which the British C-in-C and CIGS handled Pershing was 'a thing to make an angel cry'.[127] During what, even from the formal minutes, appears to have been a strained meeting, the British challenged Pershing about the 150 infantry battalions and when they would arrive. Pershing stalled, citing US domestic sentiment against American soldiers fighting under another flag, the need to maintain military morale and other reasons in favour of building full American divisions, complete with artillery.[128] According to

[126] Woodward, *Trial by Friendship*, pp. 57-8.
[127] Wilson diary, 29 January 1918.
[128] TNA, CAB 28/3, War Cabinet, IC (Allied Conferences), Volume III, IC 38, 'Notes of a Conference: Co-operation of the American Army', 29 January 1918.

Hankey, Pershing wanted the troops to be attached for training and was willing to allow them to do their share of fighting. Robertson wanted them mainly for fighting though he was willing they should be trained.[129] Afterwards, Wilson spoke to Pershing and was 'convinced that he would agree to our command if only he is properly handled and if the case is properly put to him'.[130] The next day Lloyd George and Pershing agreed a compromise to bring over the equivalent of three full-strength American divisions with the infantry being trained by the British and the artillery by the French.[131] The British case was not helped by Clemenceau who told Pershing and Colonel Edward M. House, President Wilson's representative to the SWC, that while it might be necessary to brigade AEF troops with the French Army and the BEF 'he was of the opinion that if the American troops went in, very few of them would ever come out, and that it would be foolish to expect to build up a great American army by that method.'[132] In his diary Wilson condemned Clemenceau as a 'narrow pedagogue.'[133]

Lloyd George's struggle with Robertson dominated Wilson's life for the next few weeks, but once in the CIGS role he returned to the vexed issue of American commitment. Matters came to head with the German Spring Offensive on 21 March 1918. Three days later, Wilson met the US Defence Secretary Newton Baker and the American Ambassador to

[129] CAC, Hankey diary, 29 January 1918.
[130] Wilson diary, 29 January 1918.
[131] Ibid., 30 January 1918; TNA, CAB 28/3, War Cabinet, IC (Allied Conferences), Volume III, IC 38 (a), Co-operation of the American Army, 30 January 1918.
[132] Seymour, *House Papers*, p. 274.
[133] Wilson diary, 31 January 1918.

London Walter H. Page, and 'explained the present dangerous situation & the urgency of immediate dispatch of Batt[alion]s from America. Not complete Divisions as that stupid man Pershing wants.'[134] They were impressed by the seriousness of the situation and Bliss, with the support of Baker and Pershing, signed JN18 which asked the US government to ship only infantry and machine-gun units during the emergency. Baker told his President that the effect was to postpone the creation of an 'independent American army', and was 'conceded only in view of the present critical situation…we must keep in mind the formation of an American army, while at the same time, we must not seem to sacrifice joint efficiency at a critical moment to that object.'[135] There were further frustrations ahead. As the first phase of the German offensive slowed, it became clear that President Wilson and Pershing, despite their words of assurance, did not believe they had made a commitment to parceling out the newly arriving American units to the Allies.[136] On 31 March, Lloyd George told Wilson that the American President had agreed to send 120,000 infantrymen a month for the next four months. President Wilson had also asked Britain not to introduce conscription into Ireland, an act which would make his task 'very difficult'. Considering Pershing's recent intransigence, Wilson found the offer 'a little fishy!'[137] He was right to be sceptical. At the meeting at Beauvais on 3 April, when Foch's role was extended to the 'strategic' direction of operations, Lloyd George said he

[134] Wilson diary, 24 March 1918, (original emphasis).
[135] Baker to President Wilson, 28 March 1918, *United States Army in the World War*, Department of the Army (Historical Division), (Washington DC: Center of Military Research,1988), (hereafter *USAWW*), (vol. 2), pp. 261-2.
[136] Woodward, *Trial by Friendship*, pp. 158-159.
[137] Wilson diary 31 March 1918.

understood President Wilson had agreed to send an additional 120,000 troops a month to France. Pershing said he knew nothing of it.[138]

Sackville-West, the new British PMR, complained to Wilson that he had been unable to get any written commitment from Pershing about future AEF contributions. The American was 'playing the old Pétain-Haig stunt [delaying a decision to await developments], he is shoving Bliss on one side. The man's an ass I think, he doesn't mean business. What Bliss calls the ["]God-damned American programme["] is going to b_____ up the whole show.'[139] Wilson's diary for the same day called Pershing a 'd_____ fool'.[140] The Germans launched their second major offensive on 9 April. Operation *Georgette* opened in Flanders and British forces gave up significant ground.[141] The next day Wilson received an 'alarmist' telegram from Maurice (DMO) 'saying [the] position was very serious & could only be saved by all the French & Americans coming to our assistance.' He also had a 'long talk' with Bliss at Versailles. The American was 'entirely on our side, & ag[ains]t Pershing, as regards employment of American Batts, so we can count on the old boy & Tit Willow tells me Bliss is eminently sensible & practical.'[142] Two days later, Haig issued his 'Backs to the Wall' order of the day.[143] Wilson met Plumer, the Second Army commander, at his headquarters and was told that 'if the Boches go on

[138] TNA, CAB 28/3/IC 55, *Procès-verbal of Beauvais Conference*, 3 April 1918.
[139] Wilson papers, (2/12/B/14) Sackville-West to Wilson, 8 April 1918; 'Tit Willow' succeeded Rawlinson as British PMR on 28 March 1918.
[140] Wilson diary, 8 April 1918.
[141] Zabecki, *German Offensives*, pp. 186-189.
[142] Wilson diary, 10 April 1918.
[143] J.E. Edmonds, *OH: Military Operations France and Belgium, 1918*, (vol. II), (London: Macmillan, 1937), p. 512.

attacking heavily, he cannot hold the line of hills [east of the Ypres Salient] much longer.'[144]

Wilson and Milner, who had just been appointed Secretary of State for War, met Pershing on 23 April to establish exactly what American help Britain could expect.[145] Lloyd George had been told by Lord Reading, Britain's ambassador to Washington, that the White House had reconfirmed the contribution of 120,000 men per month for four months.[146] According to Pershing no such agreement had been made and the three agreed diplomatically that there might have been a 'misunderstanding'. Less diplomatically, in his diary Wilson described Pershing as 'a hopelessly stupid pigheaded man'.[147] Milner said all available transport should be used to bring infantry: 'He considered the crucial moment of the war to be here, and that if the Germans reached Calais and the channel ports, the American divisions would be too late.'[148] Wilson and Milner met Pershing again and the British won something of a victory in getting the Americans to make a formal commitment. In the so-called London Agreement, Pershing agreed to allow six divisions, a minimum of 130,000 American infantry and machine-gun troops, to join the British in May. Pershing told his government that in the four months April to the end of July he expected 750,000 AEF troops to be transported to France.[149] It

[144] Wilson diary, 17 April 1918.
[145] Milner succeeded Derby on 20 April, the latter went to Paris as British Ambassador to replace the ailing Lord Bertie.
[146] Woodward, *Trial by Friendship*, p. 160.
[147] Wilson diary, 23 April 1918.
[148] 'Memorandum of General Pershing's visit to the British War Office, and interview with General Sir Henry Wilson, and Lord Milner, 22 April 1918', *USAWW* (vol. 2), pp 340-341.
[149] Ibid., 'London Agreement, Pershing to War Department, 24 April 1918', pp. 342-344.

was a hard-won but important victory for Milner, and Wilson, who complained that Pershing was 'so stupid, so narrow, so pigheaded'.[150]

Thereafter American troops arrived in ever-increasing numbers, but it would be some time before they were ready to enter the front line. In mid-May 1918 Lloyd George established the so-called 'X Committee' of himself, Milner and Wilson, with Hankey, or occasionally Amery, as secretary. The triumvirate met at 11am, before the War Cabinet at noon. Amery described it as a 'very interesting and free and easy gathering'.[151] Most of its meetings took place that summer and 'American co-operation' was regularly on the agenda. At the second meeting, Wilson said Haig believed that despite the large numbers of troops being shipped, only three US battalions would be in the British line soon, and for instruction only. Lloyd George, suspecting British unwillingness to use the AEF troops, said he 'had found GHQ, rather inclined to belittle the American battalions.' Wilson countered that Foch felt the same: 'He had four United States divisions practically under his orders, but he was only using one in the battle and only one brigade was at present in the line…'[152] The following day Reading reported that 250,000 Americans would arrive in May, including 180,000 infantry/machine-gun troops. Lloyd George told Wilson to ensure they would be used effectively. Milner summed up the challenge when he reported that 20,000 troops had arrived in April: 'Some of this first lot, however, had been pretty rough, and hardly knew how to

[150] Wilson diary, 24 April 1918.
[151] CAC, Amery diary, (AMEL 7/14), 17 May 1918; X Committee minutes are at TNA, CAB 23/17.
[152] TNA, X Committee minutes, (CAB 23/17/2),16 May 1918.

handle a rifle. This may have partly accounted for Sir Douglas Haig's reluctance to use them without a good deal of further training.'[153] Lloyd George continued to grumble at both X Committee and War Cabinet meetings about American policy. Wilson, as his diary and correspondence indicate, was more sanguine. This less critical approach seems to have been due in part to his relief that American forces were at last available in large numbers, even if they were being formed into Pershing's longed for American Army. At the same time Wilson had more pressing concerns, the growing power of his old friend Foch and the challenges of Unity of Command.

CONCLUSION

With the shortage of manpower besetting the war weary entente in the latter half of 1917, the need for the Allies to co-operate was greater than ever. The French felt the British were not doing enough to prosecute the war to the full and could and should take over more of their trench lines. The British political leadership, for its part, was unwilling to continue to feed the seemingly insatiable demands of the generals for men. Wilson's skills as a soldier-diplomat were put to the test when he arrived at Versailles where he worked to successfully defuse French frustrations while protecting British interests. His relationship with Clemenceau was particularly important and they met regularly over the winter of 1917-18. It is significant that despite the almost permanent presence of Lloyd George's War Cabinet colleague Milner at Versailles during this period, it

[153] TNA, X Committee minutes, (CAB 23/17/2),17 May 1918.

was Wilson whom Clemenceau turned to when he wanted reassurance about British policy. It is equally significant that Wilson invariably managed to assuage the ‘Tiger’s’ temper. The British finally agreed to take over more French line but the commitment, while significant, was not as extreme as it might have been. Wilson had less success when dealing with the Americans, particularly the AEF’s C-in-C Pershing. British hopes that large numbers of American troops would pour into the front-line trenches to fight shoulder to shoulder were stymied by President Wilson’s determination that his forces would fight as a national army. In fairness to Wilson neither he nor his colleagues knew this and thus condemned Pershing for obstinacy. Wilson displayed obstinacy of his own on the domestic front when in calling for conscription in Ireland he displayed an uncharacteristically myopic view of the politics of the land of his birth.

CHAPTER FIVE

UNITY OF COMMAND

This chapter re-evaluates Wilson's role in the establishment, development and ultimate application of 'unity of command' on the Allied forces on the Western Front in late 1917 and 1918. In this area of policy Wilson has been portrayed as either an opportunist, jumping on the bandwagon of others to serve his own directionless ambition, or as a willing dupe, moulded by astute politicians with clearer motives and vision than he. In fact, Wilson was the principal architect of the structures which led directly to the establishment of unity of command on the Western Front in 1918, and the appointment of his friend Foch as 'General in Chief of the Allied Armies' or 'Generalissimo'. 'Unity of command' was not a novel concept to Allied military and political leaders in late 1917. The notion had been discussed often during the war, with little of substance achieved.[1] The principle appealed, indeed appeared to make sense, and was cited as one reason German strategy had been so effective.[2] In early 1917, Lloyd George put Haig under the orders of the French General Nivelle for his ill-fated April offensive.[3] Subordinating the British Army to the French was a different principle to having a commander who stood above all armies. Since then, thanks to an absence of clear political authority, objections from senior military figures, and a lack of trust between the Allies, matters

[1] William Philpott, 'Squaring the Circle: the Higher Co-ordination of the Entente in the winter of 1915-16', *English Historical Review*, vol. 114 (458) (1999), pp. 875-898.
[2] Greenhalgh, *Victory Through Coalition*, p. 3; Hankey, *Supreme Command*, (vol. II), p. 597.
[3] Woodward, *Lloyd George*, pp. 144-156.

had returned to 'normal'. Allied leaders and their senior commanders met from time to time, discussed issues of mutual interest, and then returned to normal business with only occasional, limited, tangible agreement on co-operation and co-ordination. What was not in place was a formal structure for policy-making, with either advisory or, more significantly executive, powers. Wilson had been a supporter of closer co-operation between the Allies since at least October 1915. At that time, as Britain's Principal Liaison Officer with the French Army, Wilson wrote to Bonar Law condemning the French-led campaign in Salonika as an 'insane project', and the result of a failure of co-ordination between London and Paris:

> I have been warning you for many weeks about the dangers of strained relations with the French (the only way of losing the war) and the necessity of setting up a machinery for obviating this pressing danger. However this was not approved but it does not alter my opinion by a hair's breadth. I ask you again to set up a small mixed Committee of the [following]:
> 2 Foreign Affairs
> 2 War Office Ministers
> 2 Cs-in-C
> to deal with these problems and to obviate useless and mischievous "mass meetings", visits of high officials bent on saving reputations…[4]

The intervening years reinforced Wilson's views, but for most senior British soldiers in the winter of 1917-18 Robertson's view prevailed. He found the principle of unity of command 'attractive', in theory. In practice, however, it had led to the failures of the 'Nivelle era' and the losses of vital heavy guns sent to Italy. So far as unity of command was concerned, he was unconvinced: 'In short the general situation is such that our Allies require a

[4] PA, Bonar Law Papers, Wilson to Bonar Law, (BL 52/1/10), 3 December 1915.

strong military lead, and this necessitates that our forces should be provided with the means for giving this lead.' Robertson's model was not a sharing of authority, it was not unity of command; it was, rather, for Britain's military leaders, and her armies, to replace those of the French as the principal players in the Allied balance of power. In 1918 Britain should increasingly take the strategic initiative.[5] Wilson disagreed. He retained the view that the Allies needed to work more closely and in a more structured way if they were to win. It was not until late 1917, when his credibility with leading politicians rose, that he was able to put his ideas into effect.

The other key figures in the equation were Foch, the French CoS, and Milner, Lloyd George's closest ally in the War Cabinet. Wilson's 'superbly argued case' for 'integrated "Superior Direction"' of war policy was the catalyst for the creation of the SWC.[6] Its 'inter-Allied Staff', although overtly 'advisory' in nature, filled the vacuum of strategic creativity British, and to a lesser extent French, politicians believed prevailed amongst the Allied C-in-Cs. Wilson dominated the work of this Staff in its first three months and continued to do so, through the auspices of his loyal successors, for the rest of the war. He played a leading role in the development and concrete expression of the principle of 'unity of command'; an indistinct and elusive concept until then. Many British

[5] CAB 24/28/42, GT 2242, CIGS to War Cabinet, 'Future Military Policy', 9 October 1917, p. 7.
[6] Roskill, *Hankey*, p. 444, in reference to: CAB 27/8, WP 61.

colleagues saw Wilson as an uncritical Francophile. This is over simplistic. He admired the French Army and enjoyed good relations with some French soldiers and politicians, but he was not their puppet. Once Foch became commander of Allied forces on the Western Front, rather than being the obedient friend, Wilson was a stern critic, regularly warning his political masters of his fears of renewed French strategic domination. Despite this, Wilson's diplomatic skills - with ready and, usually cordial, access to Foch and Clemenceau - made a major contribution to preserving the Alliance at a critical time in Anglo-French relations. Nonetheless, the CIGS was not blind to the failings of his own colleagues, and at one point recommended that Haig be relieved of his command.

Two fundamentally important 'Joint Notes', produced, like those discussed already, by Wilson and his team, were instrumental in establishing formal Allied 'unity of command'. JN12 ('Campaign 1918'), is considered in the next chapter. Its underlying emphasis on the need for formal co-operation in the Middle East was approved unanimously by the political leaders on the SWC.[7] The same body also accepted JN14 ('The General Reserve'), and an 'Executive War Board' to oversee it, with Foch as chairman. The historiography acknowledges the relevance of these two Joint Notes in the ongoing dispute between the politicians and the military over strategic control, but their function as catalysts in Wilson's campaign for a more co-ordinated approach to war policy merits further attention. Their genesis in

[7] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note No 12 '1918 Campaign', 21 January 1918.

December 1917 and January 1918, the analysis undertaken in their creation and the arguments developed in their promotion convinced Lloyd George and his cabinet allies of Wilson's abilities. Just as importantly, he convinced the Allied politicians and senior soldiers that closer co-ordination of strategy, something which had not been achieved successfully in the war to this point, was possible. The work of the SWC secretariat has been passed over briefly in the historiography but closer consideration reveals the multiple challenges facing the Allied supreme command at the start of 1918.

JOINT NOTE 14: THE GENERAL RESERVE

This was the most controversial paper of the 14 produced by the PMRs while Wilson led their deliberations. While there was disagreement about action in other theatres, soldiers and statesmen agreed that France and Flanders was the principal front. As discussed in the previous chapter, the problem of manpower and the linked issue of the British taking over more line from the French, also concentrated minds. Wilson believed that a large, mobile, reserve force was essential if the Allies were to overcome the manpower challenge. Wilson's plan was accepted by the SWC on 2 February 1918. The PMRs said the formation of a General Reserve 'for the whole of the Allied forces on the Western front, both in France and Italy, is imperative'. The politicians were asked to act quickly and to get the views of their C-in-Cs and CoSs on the 'number, situation and command'

of this reserve.[8] Wilson's secretariat began work on the subject in November, their war games providing justification for a reserve capable of being deployed to any sector. The second meeting of the PMRs on 8 December agreed the issue of reserves was a key element in deciding Allied strategy for 1918.[9] In January Wilson lobbied for the reserve, pressing Clemenceau, Milner and Lloyd George, with support from Foch. Unsurprisingly, the idea did not find favour with Haig, Robertson or Pétain.

The winter of 1917-18 was militarily and politically fraught for the British supreme command. The campaigns of 1917 had been disappointing and costly for the Allies. In Britain, Lloyd George was unhappy with his generals' apparent obsession with offensives on the Western Front, but leading a coalition government he was far from confident of his own political security. France had a new Prime Minister who was determined to win the war but who argued that his British allies could and should bear much more of the burden. As a result, opportunities existed for Wilson to influence strategy, but also for him to fail. Although damaged in the eyes of politicians such as Lloyd George and Milner, Haig and Robertson still had considerable support in Parliament and in the Press.[10] Despite Lloyd George's frustration with Robertson, Wilson continued to believe that the

[8] TNA, CAB 25/120, 'Supreme War Council, Papers and Minutes', (enclosure 64), Minutes of a meeting of Permanent Military Representatives of the Supreme War Council, (hereafter SWC Minutes) 23 January 1918, 'Schedule B': Joint Note 14: The General Reserve; see also Greenhalgh, *Foch*, p. 287.
[9] TNA, CAB 25/120, (enclosure 17), SWC Minutes, 8 December 1917; Wilson diary, 8 December 1917.
[10] For a discussion of the role of the Press in this period see Stephen Badsey, 'The Missing Western Front; Politics, Propaganda and Strategy 1918', in idem, *The British Army in Battle and its Image 1914-18* (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 185-209.

CIGS had a role. On 10 January, he talked to Robertson about 'the vital necessity of having a central reserve under Versailles or under him [Robertson] and Foch. He is much taken with this idea, but why the devil didn't he think of it himself.'[11] The following day he saw Clemenceau, who looked 'tired and depressed' and who feared the Americans were going to come too late':

> I told him of my scheme for a central Reserve under Versailles, which he said at once meant "under Wilson" to which I agreed, and I spoke long & earnestly to him on this question of 3 Boche attacks, the 3rd being only launched when the first two had used up all Haig's & Pétain's Reserves. This would be fatal & my plan of Reserves under Versailles or under Foch & Robertson is the only possible solution.[12]

These contradictory diary entries, a day apart, one suggesting Robertson, with Foch, should take authority over the reserve, the other accepting the responsibility for it himself, has been interpreted as an example of Wilson's artful deceit of a colleague.[13] An alternative interpretation is that when Clemenceau, who liked Wilson, supported the Versailles option he saw an opportunity to settle a problem while advancing himself. It would have been stranger for Wilson to have rejected Clemenceau's confidence than it was that he accepted it.

Lloyd George wanted to regain control of military policy. He played fleetingly with the notion of calling for the return of Joffre as 'Generalissimo' with Wilson as his CoS. The latter told Milner that he 'had

[11] Wilson diary, 10 January 1918.
[12] Ibid., 11 January 1918.
[13] Woodward, *Lloyd George*, p. 256.

always been in favour of one C-in-C in theory and opposed to it in practice'. He opposed the appointment of a Generalissimo and, 'if this was tried it would make it still more impossible if he was given a foreigner for Chief of Staff'. The 'real solution to our difficulties', he said 'lies in the further development of the [sic] Versailles, which the PM himself set up'.[14] He also told Milner of 'my proposal for a Central Reserve under Versailles'.[15] At this stage Wilson was gaining in confidence, even those for whom he had little regard paid him complements. On 17 January, Smuts reportedly told Duncannon 'that if I [Wilson] played my cards properly I would soon decide the strategy of the campaign and that if I had been CIGS for the last 2-3 years the war would now have been over...'[16] With Clemenceau's support in mind, Wilson disposed of the notion that Foch and Robertson, as their nations' respective CoSs, should manage the reserve. He and Foch 'discussed my plan for Central Reserve under Versailles with which Foch agrees, & then he thinks we want some executive power & authority. He thinks my proposal will do very well as a commencement.'[17] Encouraged, Wilson took his proposal to the next meeting of the PMRs, but Weygand 'expressed the opinion that no General Reserve was possible without a single Commander-in-Chief for all the armies to deal with it.' Wilson argued that such an arrangement was 'impossible' but as a general reserve was 'highly desirable it was equally desirable to find some other arrangement so as to be able to deal with it'.[18]

[14] PA, Lloyd George Papers, F/38/3/2, Wilson to Milner, 14 January 1918.
[15] Wilson diary, 13, 14 January 1918.
[16] Ibid., 17 January 1918 (original emphasis).
[17] Ibid., 18 January 1918.
[18] TNA, CAB 25/120, (enclosure 56), SWC Minutes, 19 January 1918.

Thanks to Foch, Wilson's plan suffered only the briefest hiatus. On 21 January, he noted: 'Weygand came to tell me he was sorry he had objected to my paper about [the] necessity of having a Central Reserve & he was now prepared to agree. He had evidently seen Foch!'[19]

This was a critical period in Wilson's career. In the days leading up to the third meeting of the SWC he convinced his allies of his strategic vision while disarming his opponents. The conference would be asked to approve fourteen Joint Notes, all of them constructed by Wilson and his team, several of them already facing opposition from his colleagues in the British General Staff, and GHQ. If standing on the defensive in the west, while attempting some form of advance in the east, and the creation of a general reserve were not controversial enough, Wilson was also coming around to the notion of a commander for the Allied reserve, or a 'Generalissimo'.[20] On the eve of the conference Wilson met Robertson:

> We then discussed my paper about reserves and I told him that my original idea of having a small pool under Versailles or under Foch and him would not do and that on working out the battle carefully I had come to the conclusion that all the Reserves must be under one authority. I told him that for the first time in the war I was wavering about a C-in-C. But he said "We can't do that" so I left him to think over it.[21]

The principle of a general reserve was accepted by 'all the soldiers and statesmen' present at the Versailles summit. What was in doubt was the question of how to command it.[22] Wilson was aware of this problem, but,

[19] Wilson diary, 21 January 1918; Amery diary, 21 January 1918, in Barnes and Nicholson, *Amery Diaries*, p. 201.
[20] This was a more limited role than the one Foch ultimately adopted.
[21] Wilson diary, 28 January 1918, (original emphasis).
[22] Hankey, *Supreme Command*, (vol. II), p. 769.

knowing he had the support of Foch, Lloyd George and Clemenceau he seems to have been content to allow his adversaries to appear narrow-minded and un-co-operative. The day before the conference he had a meeting with Haig and Robertson:

> To discuss taking over the line and also the question of Reserves. I was horrified at the ignorance and total inability of Haig, Lawrence and Robertson to grasp the elements of either problem. Futile and childish arguments were brought forward and LG afterwards told me he had formed the lowest opinion of all three men... then before dinner a long talk with LG and Milner about taking over the line, about the Reserve question, about Palestine. Of course LG is longing to get rid of Robertson …[23]

Much has been written about the third meeting of the SWC (30 January-2 February 1918), with attention being paid to the debates around JN12 and JN14.[24] For the most part it has been characterised as Lloyd George's successful attempt to wrest control of war policy from the senior commanders, specifically Haig and Robertson, with the latter losing his job in the process. The summation, while accurate, is incomplete. This '"personalisation" of the debate, which coloured (and colours) attitudes and responses to it' has led to an over-simplified representation of Wilson's role.[25] His diplomatic skills, backed up by his well-argued reports, have been overlooked in favour of a simplistic picture of a man with a silver-tongue in the right place at the right time. This is to misrepresent his pro-active, influential contribution. Wilson had an ability to see issues from

[23] Wilson diary, 29 January 1918; Herbert 'Lorenzo' Lawrence was briefly Haig's Head of Intelligence and replaced Kiggell as CoS in February 1918, Paul Harris, 'Soldier Banker; Lieutenant-General Sir Herbert Lawrence as the BEF's Chief of Staff 1918', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, vol. 90 (361), (2012): pp. 44-67.
[24] Greenhalgh, *Foch*, pp. 286-287; idem., 'Paul Painlevé and Franco-British Relations in 1918', *Contemporary British History*, vol. 25 (2011), pp. 5-27; Jeffery, *Wilson*, pp. 214-218; Woodward, *Lloyd George*, pp. 253-260; Woodward, *Robertson*, pp. 196-201.
[25] Jeffery, *Wilson*, p. 216.

a different angle, challenge established views and explain them clearly to politicians tired of what they perceived as dogmatic and inarticulate generals.[26] For the first time in the war he had an audience of the highest authority, the British and French Prime Ministers, the French CoS, and the soon-to-be British Secretary of State for War. These men had similar views and were willing to listen to his ideas. Wilson's ability to persuade is evidenced by his diary entry for the first day of the SWC meeting. Lloyd George, Milner, Clemenceau, the new Italian Prime Minister Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, and his Foreign Minister Baron Giorgio Sonnino met at Wilson's villa.[27] They talked for two and a half hours and agreed on the necessity of a central reserve. Clemenceau, seemingly without concerning himself with where the troops would come, from 'insisted that it must be a big one of – he said – 40 Divisions. He would not hear of my original proposal of 10 or 12 Divisions.' Lloyd George continued to grumble about Robertson's attitude: 'LG discussing the matter with me later said he found it very difficult to know what to do about Robertson and me, though he said he knew what he wanted.'[28] In February the Prime Minister would finally achieve his ambition, the forced resignation of Robertson and his replacement by Wilson.

After agreeing JN12 on the 1918 Campaign, and 11 of the 12 other Joint Notes, the next day and a half were devoted to the creation of the general

[26] Years later, in an otherwise critical profile, Lloyd George praised Wilson's 'lucidity of mind...It was a delight to hear him unravel and expound a military problem,' Lloyd George, *Memoirs* (vol. II), p. 1688.
[27] Orlando became Italian Prime Minister on 29 October 1917, after the disaster at Caporetto, Cassar, *Forgotten Front*, p. 77.
[28] Wilson diary, 30 January 1918.

reserve and its command.[29] For Foch, 'the necessity of having a Reserve was absolutely indisputable'. It had to be relevant to the whole of the Western Front, from Nieuport to the Adriatic. Command should lie with the Italian, British and French C-in-Cs working together.[30] Robertson agreed in principle with the creation of a reserve but doubted the need for one at present because 'most of the Allied troops were needed where they were'. Command of reserves was 'fundamental', and if one had to be created then, as Foch had suggested, it should be directed by the CsOS. Its job was to perform those duties which could not be undertaken by one C-in-C acting alone on one of the fronts. Robertson was as consistent as ever in in his logic. Just as when he had objected to the creation of the SWC and its staff of military advisers, he argued for power and responsibility to lie together:

> Whoever commands the Reserve must be in a position to issue orders immediately the emergency arises. The central controlling body, however, should interfere as little as possible with the Commanders-in-Chief, who were responsible to their respective governments.[31]

The delegates were unable to reach agreement in a debate Wilson described as a 'great fight'. Robertson, he wrote:

> …wanted the command to be given to Foch and himself. I wrote out notes for LG showing the duties of the Commanders of this Reserve and how impossible it would be for CIGS to be over here to perform them. LG entirely agreed and showed that neither London, Rome or Washington could spare their CIGSs, though Paris of course was different...There remained, therefore, only 2 solutions (as everyone agreed a C-in-C impossible) one was Versailles and the other was some Generals *ad hoc*.[32]

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[29] A decision on Joint Note 4 'The Balkan Problem' was adjourned for further research.
[30] TNA, CAB 25/120, 'Supreme War Council, Papers and Minutes', (enclosure 75), '*Procès-verbal* of the fourth meeting of the Third Session of the Supreme War Council, 1 February 1918, pp. 2-3.
[31] TNA, CAB 25/120, 1 February 1918, p. 3.
[32] Wilson diary, 1 February 1918; CAC, HNKY, Hankey diary, 1 February 1918.

Using Wilson's notes, Hankey wrote a new proposal to put the reserve under the control of a committee consisting of the British, Italian and United States PMRs with Foch in the Chair.[33] Haig felt the decision 'to some extent' made Foch 'a "Generalissimo"'.[34] The resolution was adopted later that day and thus:

> The long duel between me and Robertson has ended in his complete defeat. The Executive War Board now set up consists of the Mil Reps here, less Weygand but plus Foch. Robertson fought to the last to be on it but was badly beaten. I wonder will he resign? … Robertson was over-ruled about the 1918 campaign and squarely beaten over the question of Command of the General Reserve. In other words our Cabinet and the Cabinets of all the Allies have backed everything Versailles has advised. This really was a triumph.[35]

THE FATE OF THE GENERAL RESERVE

The controlling body for the Reserve, the EWB, met the next day and twice the following week.[36] Foch, who would have commanded it, and his friend Wilson, had good reasons to want it to succeed. The events culminating in the principle of where command of the reserve lay was at the root of Robertson's resignation from the post of CIGS. Wilson took over Robertson's role at the War Office on 18 February 1918. The acceptance of the principle of the reserve and the EWB, with Foch as its chairman, 'constituted a momentous step forward' towards unity of command.[37] It did little, however, to ease Anglo-French tensions over troop numbers and the extent of front line each army held. One of Wilson's

[33] CAC, HNKY, Hankey diary, 2 February 1918; Wilson diary, 2 February 1918.
[34] Haig diary, 2 February 1918, Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig: Diaries*, p. 378.
[35] Wilson diary, 2 February 1918.
[36] TNA, CAB 25/119, Executive War Board minutes, 3, 5, 6 February 1918.
[37] Callwell, *Wilson*, (vol. II), p. 63.

greatest attributes was pragmatism, his ability to know when to stand his ground and when to give way. Virtue or vice, this 'political' astuteness deserted him on Ireland, but on other issues it was generally sound. On the matter of the reserve, his own creation, he was prepared to bend with events. Days after becoming CIGS Wilson saw Haig who 'flatly refuses' to hand over any of his divisions to the Reserve and 'says he won't be responsible for his line, and rather than do it he would resign.' Haig was prepared to contribute two divisions from Italy, but as such a move was another point of Allied disagreement there seemed little chance of immediate action. Pétain was 'in much the same mood,' according to Clemenceau, who also favoured using troops from Italy and perhaps growing the force later: 'I confess I don't agree, and said so bluntly, but I am not in a position to overcome the Tiger, Pétain and Haig.'[38] Haig's argument was that he feared an imminent attack and placing some of his force under another's command would put his defence plans at 'grave risk'.[39]

Apart from pure pragmatism, there are other likely reasons for Wilson's turning away from the reserve. While at Versailles a reserve army under him and Foch gave him power and importance. Now he was at the War Office, he had both. Haig perceived that 'with his advent to power as CIGS', Wilson's interest in Versailles had weakened.[40] With Robertson vanquished, Wilson made great efforts to work co-operatively with Haig.

[38] Wilson diary, 25 and 26 February 1918.
[39] Haig diary, 25 February 1918, in Sheffield & Bourne, *Haig: Diaries*, p. 384.
[40] Ibid., pp. 384-5.

Finally, as CIGS Wilson had a first-hand view of the pressures on the BEF's manpower. In contrast, Wilson's two closest friends on the Western Front lined up against him. Rawlinson, his successor as British PMR, sided with Foch. He wrote to Wilson four times in a week to press the Versailles case, accusing Haig of a *'non possumus'* [*Lat.* "we cannot"] attitude' and of negating Versailles' authority by agreeing informally with Pétain that they would each come to the aid of the other if the need arose.[41] This 'mere local adjustment' between commanders was exactly the kind of thing Wilson had warned against when lobbying for a strategic supervisory role for the SWC.[42] Foch, also aware that without a General Reserve to command there was little for the EWB he chaired to do, was 'very bitter' at Haig's refusal to co-operate and wanted the Board's powers enhanced or for it to be wound up.[43] Wilson admitted that Haig appeared to have:

> …gone back to his original position…which, by the way, I think he never left, and refused to ear-mark any divisions for the Special Reserve… it does not seem to me that it is worth our while bringing the Executive Committee into action for so small a force, unless the French and Italians are prepared to put up substantial forces, which I very much doubt when they see that we produce none.[44]

Thus, Wilson put paid to the body he had fought to establish only weeks before. Although in his diary he continued to argue the rightness of the reserve he recognised that without the co-operation of Haig the cause was

[41] Wilson papers, Rawlinson to Wilson (2/13A/1) 1 March 1918, (2/13A/3) 3 March, (2/13A/6) 6 March, (2/13A/9) 7 March.
[42] TNA, CAB 25/120/3, SWC, British Secretariat, Papers and Minutes, 'Matters for Action or Watching by the Minister in Charge', 4 December 1917.
[43] Wilson papers, Rawlinson to Wilson (2/13A/10), 8 March 1918.
[44] Wilson papers, Wilson to Rawlinson (2/13A/4), 4 March 1918.

lost. Just before the meeting of the Fourth Session of the SWC Wilson had another discussion with the Field Marshal:

> He says he can't and he won't give any divisions to the General Reserve. He explained that he had not enough for [a] GHQ Reserve, and he said that, if I wanted a General Reserve, I must make some more divisions and I must get more man-power…I impressed on him the fact that by refusing to contribute to the General Reserve he was killing that body, and he would have to live on Pétain's charity, and he would find that very cold charity. But I was quite unable to persuade him.[45]

Without the support of the C-in-Cs, the SWC resolved to establish a reserve when feasible. Wilson acknowledged that his was 'a nonsense'.[46] Milner disagreed and warned Lloyd George it 'would look very bad indeed' if the idea were dropped.[47] His protest was academic. Less than a week later, on 21 March, the Germans launched the first phase of the '*Kaiserschlacht',* their Spring Offensive, putting an end to the issue.[48] Failure to reach agreement had convinced Foch that without real executive power, bodies such as the EWB were little more than talking shops. The German attack gave Foch, with essential support from Wilson, his opportunity to gain real authority.

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[45] Wilson diary, 13 March 1918.
[46] TNA, CAB 28/3, War Cabinet, IC (Allied Conferences), Volume III, IC 47 (SWC), '*Procès-verbal* of the First Meeting of the Fourth Session of Supreme War Council,' 14 March 1918; Wilson diary, 14 March 1918.
[47] PA, Lloyd George Papers, Milner to Lloyd George, (LG/F/23/3/19), 14 March 1918.
[48] The most comprehensive work on the action is Zabecki, *German Offensives*; also, Martin Middlebrook, *The Kaiser's Battle* (London: Penguin, 1978); Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory*; Tim Travers, *How the War Was Won: Command and Technology on the Western Front, 1917-1918* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1992).

Much attention has been paid in the historiography to Haig's recollection of the events surrounding Foch's appointment as 'Generalissimo'.[49] In the typescript version of his diary for 25 March, Haig stated that he telegraphed for Wilson and Milner to come to France to arrange that 'General Foch or some other determined general, who would fight, should be given supreme control of the operations in France.'[50] This detail is not in the original handwritten (manuscript) version of the diary and Sheffield has noted that no record exists of the telegram. He concluded that: 'The simplest explanation is that a tired and stressed man let off steam in his diary, apportioning blame and giving himself the credit he believed he deserved.'[51] Wilson's role in the decision has received less critical attention. His diary adds some credence to part of Haig's version of events, the call to Wilson, albeit with slight differences in timing. Wilson received a telephone call from Foch at 5.30pm:

> …asking me what I thought of [the] situation, & we are of one mind that someone must catch a hold or we shall be beaten. I said I would come over & see him.
> At 7 0'c. meeting at 10 Downing Street … While we were discussing, a telephone from Haig to say 3rd Army was falling back to the Ancre & asking me to go over.[52]

He recorded that he arrived at Haig's headquarters at 11.50am the next day: 'I told Haig that in my opinion we must get greater unity of action, & I suggested that Foch should co-ordinate the action of both C-in-Cs. In the end Douglas Haig agreed.' Wilson proposed to Foch and Pétain that when

[49] Elizabeth Greenhalgh, 'Myth and Memory: Sir Douglas Haig and the Imposition of Unified Command in March 1918,' *Journal of Military History*, vol. 68, (2004), pp. 771-820; Sheffield, *The Chief*, pp. 274-5.
[50] Haig diary, 25 March 1918, in Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig: Diaries*, pp. 392-393.
[51] Sheffield, *The Chief*, p. 275.
[52] Wilson diary, 24 March 1918.

the British and French leaders met he would 'suggest that he (Foch) should be commissioned by both Governments to co-ordinate the military action of the two C-in-Cs.'[53] British and French political and military leaders, including Clemenceau, Poincaré, Milner, Foch, Pétain, Haig and Wilson, with General Sir Julian Byng (GOC Third Army), Plumer (Second Army) and General Sir Henry Horne (First Army), convened at Doullens on 26 March.[54] Wilson had a preparatory meeting with Milner and Haig, at which the latter 'agreed to my proposal for Foch to co-ordinate'. Milner and Clemenceau approved this on behalf of their governments. According to Wilson's diary: 'Both Lawrence & Haig are delighted with this new arrangement about Foch. So is Foch & so really is Clemenceau, who patted me on the head & said I was *un bon garçon*.'[55] Clemenceau had long supported unity of command under a Generalissimo and knew Wilson, while sceptical, was more open to the idea than Robertson.[56] Even allowing for a degree of personal aggrandisement, Wilson played a more active role in Foch's appointment than has previously been acknowledged. At Versailles, Wilson used this independence from Haig and Robertson to push his own agenda. Once in the positon of CIGS, with Foch as Allied Generalissimo, Wilson's energy and creativity, together with their old friendship, would be put to the test.

[53] Wilson diary, 25 March 1918.
[54] TNA, CAB 28/3, War Cabinet, IC (Allied Conferences), Volume III, IC 52, 'Memorandum by Lord Milner on his visit to France, including the Doullens Conference, 26 March 1918'.
[55] Wilson diary, 26 March 1918.
[56] Newhall, *Clemenceau*, p. 392; Woodward, *Lloyd George*, pp. 255-6.

FOCH AS GENERALISSIMO

The new, 'unified', approach to Allied strategy making on the Western Front, combined with a series of major German offensives resulted, inevitably, in strained relations. Haig and Pétain found themselves operating under a new, unfamiliar and evolving system. Neither C-in-C was any longer the final arbiter of how and when to deploy his armies. It is incorrect, however, to suggest that Foch's authority was 'rarely challenged'.[57] Wilson, while defending British interests, injected pragmatism and exploited his rapport with the French leadership. The result was that, unlike in the first 18 months of the war, when Anglo-French relations lurched from one crisis to another, disagreements with the potential to develop into major rifts were defused and smoothed over, albeit not without considerable noise and bluster. Wilson successfully represented Haig's anxieties over Foch's use of his forces, and behind the scenes he grew concerned by what he believed were growing signs of attempted French strategic hegemony. He invested energy, and personal capital, in alerting both Lloyd George and Milner, who became Secretary of State for War in mid-April, to these fears. He also worked successfully to keep Britain's French ally 'on side', particularly in late May and June when the latter's continued commitment to the conflict seemed, to British leaders, problematic. Wilson had his concerns about French conduct, and his relationship with Clemenceau was sometimes fraught, but never reached breaking point. Nonetheless, the Wilson-Foch dynamic, though punctuated by occasional quarrels, remained robust, enabling a greater

[57] Philpott, 'Foch', in Hughes and Seligmann, *Leadership*, p. 43.

level of Allied co-operation than had been achieved at any earlier period in the war.

When the Doullens Agreement was signed, Wilson was already aware of the less accommodating side of Foch's character. They clashed at the second meeting of the EWB over the number of divisions each country should allocate to the nascent General Reserve. Wilson noted, with apparent surprise, that Foch had been 'difficult and unreasonable' and had used his casting vote as chairman to overrule the former in favour of his own proposal. Typically, Wilson thought his friend was at fault, and told Foch afterwards 'that we must not make things difficult or the machine would never work.'[58] Over the next year Wilson became familiar with Foch's stubborn determination and self-belief, or 'clear-sightedness' as the Marshal's recent biographer has termed it.[59] Wilson's priority after Doullens was to ensure the speedy move of French reinforcements to the British front. The BEF was undermanned and facing a major offensive, with more expected. Wilson's abiding fear was that the British and French armies would 'lose contact', the British being forced back on the Channel ports and the French falling back to defend Paris. Such a rift, he believed, could mean the loss of the war. Despite British problems, the CIGS told the War Cabinet meeting of 23 March that while French assistance was 'indispensible' another attack was expected on their front in Champagne and 'we must not make too great a demand upon them until the situation

[58] Wilson diary, 5 February 1918.
[59] Greenhalgh, *Foch*, pp. 517-8.

there was clearer.' The Prime Minister countered that if the plan for a General Reserve had been carried out 'it would not have been necessary to have this bargaining process.'[60] The next day Lloyd George complained to Riddell, that '…one of the disasters of the war was the failure to appoint Henry Wilson to high command.'[61] Be that as it may, there was no doubt about the seriousness of the situation, but maintaining a balance between the competing priorities of the two C-in-Cs was one reason Wilson, who took a dim view of Pétain's abilities, favoured Foch as arbiter of strategic goals. When Wilson arrived in France to assess the crisis, Haig warned him that 'unless the "whole French Army" came up we were beaten & it would be better to make peace on any terms we could.'[62] Pétain, with Foch's encouragement, ordered 10 French divisions to aid the British, but the question of the size, location and timing of French support dominated Wilson's work for the next month.[63]

The confusion with which the BEF in France reacted to Operation *Michael* was echoed in London. Wilson briefed Lloyd George, the King and then the War Cabinet, reassuring them that, despite serous setbacks, 'the chances were in our favour now.'[64] Anxious to verify Wilson and Milner's assessments, Lloyd George sent Churchill to France to see Foch and provide 'any form of assistance'.[65] This outraged both Wilson and Milner

[60] TNA, CAB 23/5/63, War Cabinet, 23 March 1918.
[61] Riddell, *War Diary*, diary 24 March 1918, p. 320.
[62] Wilson diary, 25 March 1918.
[63] Zabecki, *German Offensives*, p. 152; see Edmonds*, France and Belgium, 1918*, vol. I, p. 549.
[64] Wilson diary, 27 March 1918; TNA CAB 23/5/66, War Cabinet, 27 March 1918.
[65] Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill: 1917-22* (vol. IV) (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 84.

who both saw it as interference in their areas of responsibility. Wilson caught Churchill aboard his train at Charing Cross: 'He was being sent to Foch by LG! I told him I could not agree & I must have this changed & he must go to Clemenceau not to any soldier.' The Prime Minister told Wilson, perhaps to mollify him, that he wanted Churchill to see Clemenceau because the British Ambassador Lord Bertie was 'no use!' Wilson speculated that Churchill would 'advise LG to send Derby to Paris & put him (Winston) into the WO!'[66] Lloyd George subsequently instructed Churchill to 'stick to Paris and not go directing strategy at GHQ'. Regardless, Churchill visited GHQ, and was given a personal tour of the forward areas by Clemenceau. His reports to the British Prime Minister so upset Milner that he called on Wilson at his home:

> At this morning's Cabinet LG read out portions of 2 wires rec[eive]d from Winston…Milner referred to this and said he was going to tell LG that either he (M) must have LG's full confidence or he would have to leave the Govt. I agreed with Milner. This sending Winston over – first, with the idea of going to Foch which I killed, & then to Clemenceau is a direct snub to Milner who, after all, represented the Govt at Doullens & has, all along, been the Cabinet member at Versailles.[67]

Churchill had been urging a major French counter-offensive and reported that he was happy with their preparations.[68] Wilson was as jealous as Milner of Churchill's access and anxious to get him back to London: 'He is doing mischief in France.'[69] The next day the Prime Minister, at Churchill's request and following 'a serious misunderstanding' between Foch, Haig

[66] Wilson diary, 28 March 1918 (original emphasis).
[67] Ibid., 30 March 1918; BLO, Milner diary, 29 and 30 March 1918.
[68] Hankey diary 29 March 1918, Hankey, *Supreme Command*, (vol. II), p. 789.
[69] Wilson diary, 2 April 1918.

and Rawlinson' over troop deployment, crossed to France with Wilson.[70] Churchill told them 'Clemenceau wanted Foch's position strengthened. I agreed but not up to C-in-C especially as the Tiger wished this principally to allow Foch to coerce Pétain & not Haig who was working smoothly.'[71] The War Cabinet had already discussed extending Foch's powers to give him the right to issue 'directions or orders, instead of being limited to co-ordination.' Lloyd George had been in favour, but stopped short of making Foch C-in-C. Wilson suggested that Foch probably did not need any additional powers and that it would be 'inadvisable' to change something that seemed to be working well.[72] Woodward has argued that Wilson's motivation in seeking to restrict Foch's powers was 'self advancement' and a desire to ensure his friend did not become too powerful.[73] An alternative interpretation, favoured in this work, is that Wilson was still coming to terms with the impact of the position of Generalissimo on Allied strategy. Despite his confidence in Foch, he had an abiding fear of French domination of this strategy, one which grew as Wilson's relationship with Clemenceau came under pressure. When Lloyd George and Clemenceau met at Beauvais at the beginning of April, Wilson opposed changing Foch's remit because, he said, he wanted to avoid any opportunity for Haig and Pétain to willfully 'misunderstand' the Generalissimo's role. He argued, unsuccessfully, that the Doullens remit was stronger than the new proposal '... but the Tiger & LG were in favour of the change…Lloyd George said [the] British public wanted Foch to have real power; did

[70] Gilbert, *Churchill: 1917-22*, p. 102; TNA, CAB 23/6/2, War Cabinet, 2 April 1918.
[71] Wilson diary, 3 April 1918.
[72] TNA, CAB 23/6/2, War Cabinet, 2 April 1918.
[73] Woodward, *Lloyd George*, p. 289.

Doullens give this power?'[74] Wilson then drafted the agreement, including the right of either C-in-C to appeal to his government if he believed Foch's orders endangered his army.[75] Wilson, Haig and Lloyd George all stressed the urgent need for a French offensive. Foch agreed. If Wilson felt he had been defeated in his scheme of 'self advancement', at Foch's expense, it was not reflected in his usually frank diary, the entry for this date concluding: 'On the whole a satisfactory day.' [76] Clemenceau suggested subsequently that Foch should also be made C-in-C of the Italian theatre:

> I am entirely opposed & said so so strongly that the Cabinet agreed & wired saying that they did not agree. Foch is 67; he is not popular with the Italians; he has not got a Staff yet; he has not yet by <u>any means</u> got our front in hand, & in consequence I think he would be entirely overloaded.[77]

The War Cabinet's diplomatic response was that they thought it 'inadvisable' to burden Foch with additional responsibilities and that the subject should be discussed at the next meeting of the SWC.[78]

Despite his agreement at Beauvais, Foch failed to honour his promise of a French counter-offensive, nor would he agree to Haig's plea for the French to relieve some of the British line, ideally north of the Somme, or in French Flanders, where another German attack was expected.[79] In a tacit acknowledgement of how the balance of power had shifted, Haig asked

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[74] Wilson diary, 3 April 1918.
[75] Hankey, *Supreme Command*, (vol. II), pp. 791-2; the full text of the Beauvais Agreement appears as an appendix to TNA, CAB 23/6/4, War Cabinet, 4 April 1918.
[76] Wilson diary, 3 April 1918; TNA, CAB 28/3, War Cabinet, IC (Allied Conferences), Volume III, IC 55 (a), '*Procès-verbal* of a Conference at Beauvais, 3 April 1918'.
[77] Wilson diary, 5 April 1918.
[78] TNA, CAB 23/6/11, War Cabinet minutes, 5 April 1918.
[79] Harris, *Haig*, p. 466-7.

Wilson to intervene on the BEF's behalf and the War Cabinet gave the latter 'full powers to do what I thought best.'[80] Haig and Lawrence told the CIGS they now favoured French support in Flanders. Wilson disagreed and wanted the French to relieve the British right in the Somme sector, but Haig said he was 'afraid of French troops taking over our line in front of Amiens as he says they are fighting badly & would lose Amiens.' Haig had concluded that 'the French have neither enough troops nor stomach for a big attack ...such as Foch was contemplating last Wed[nesday]'. Wilson spent two fruitless hours with Foch. The Generalissimo 'simply would not hear' of moving troops to Flanders, nor to supporting the defence of Amiens. All Wilson got was a commitment to put French reserves astride the Somme for deployment further north if required. His mission having failed, all he could do was urge Haig, who was worried that the movement of French forces would hinder his own, to register a note of protest.[81] The British C-in-C castigated Foch and complained that Wilson 'did not help us at all in our negotiations…His sympathies almost seem to be with the French.'[82] It was a reminder to Wilson that his old friendship with Foch had its limitations. One outcome was that Wilson persuaded Foch to accept Lieutenant-General Sir John Du Cane as principal liaison officer between Haig and Foch.[83] A recent Haig biographer noted that it was unclear whose idea this was, but according to Wilson's diary he suggested it to Haig who did 'not in the least understand the situation yet', on 6 April.[84] As

[80] Wilson diary, 8 April 1918.
[81] Ibid., 9 April 1918.
[82] Haig diary, 9 April 1918, in Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig: Diaries*, p. 400.
[83] Wilson diary, 9 April 1918.
[84] Harris, *Haig*, p. 470; Wilson diary, 6 April 1918.

a former liaison officer, Wilson knew the importance of having a senior officer in such a role, at such a time. Foch rejected the idea when put to him by Haig, but was persuaded by Wilson.[85] Foch told Wilson that he wanted a title, the latter first favouring 'Chief of Staff of the Allied Forces.' Wilson consulted Clemenceau, who suggested 'C-in-C of Allied Forces but I pointed out that Foch did not command in Italy nor in any theatre except France so I proposed C-in-C of Allied Forces in France & he agreed.' Lloyd George and Milner also gave their consent.[86] The resilience of the Foch-Wilson relationship is evidenced in latter's congratulatory message: 'A thousand congratulations on your new title, it sounds almost as grand as Monsieur Foch.'[87]

While Wilson was meeting Foch, news had begun to arrive of the second major German offensive move, Operation *Georgette*, where the British had expected, in French Flanders.[88] Foch's reluctance to relieve the British with French forces caused more Allied friction. Wilson spent April shuttling between London and the front; on each of his four visits he saw Haig and Foch, and Clemenceau three times.[89] Wilson aimed to cajole the French to do more, while attempting to calm GHQ's irritation with their ally. Wilson's actions demonstrated how misplaced was the label of blind Francophilia that had long been attached to him, most recently by Haig himself, and deserves examination. Wilson was exasperated with Foch's apparent

[85] Wilson diary, 9 April 1918; Haig diary, 9 April 1918, in Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig: Diaries*, p. 400; Du Cane was appointed on 12 April 1918.
[86] Ibid., 9, 10 April 1918.
[87] Wilson correspondence, (HHW 2/24A/14) Wilson to Foch, 12 April 1918.
[88] Wilson diary, 9 April 1918; Zabecki, *German Offensives*, pp. 186-7.
[89] Jeffery, *Wilson*, p. 224.

refusal to help the BEF, and a perceived absence of foresight in the Generalissimo's strategic planning. Also, he grew increasingly suspicious of Clemenceau's ambitions for France's strategic position. Wilson began a campaign to convince Lloyd George and Milner of this perceived threat, one which coloured Anglo-French relations both for the remainder of the war, and during the subsequent peace process. His overarching fear was that the British Army, facing relentless pressure, would 'lose contact' with the French. Once separated, the enemy would be able to defeat each Allied force at will. The CIGS attempted to take a broader strategic view of the campaign than, he believed, Foch or Haig were doing. On 10 April, he convinced Clemenceau that if the BEF had 'seriously to retire' it would be 'death' to lose the Channel ports. Instead, they finally agreed, the French should hold the left (north) bank of the Somme making it impossible for the Germans to break through there. He then agreed with Foch that French reinforcements could move into place behind them. Most importantly for Wilson: 'I told Foch of my conversation with the Tiger…[about] vital necessity of covering the Ports and Foch absolutely agreed, so my mind is quite at ease on this most important of all points.'[90] It would not stand at ease for long.

Wilson continued to brief the War Cabinet on the 'desperately serious' state of affairs in Flanders.[91] His suspicions of French motives grew and he 'violently' opposed Clemenceau's request for Lloyd George to go to

[90] Wilson diary, 10 April 1918.
[91] Ibid., 12 April 1918; TNA CAB 23/6/12, War Cabinet, 12 April 1918.

Paris. He believed the Tiger 'wanted to interfere' in military matters. Milner went instead, but summoned Wilson to join him 'as soon as possible as I alone can bridge the gulf.'[92] The 'gulf' was caused by British demands for French support for Plumer's Second Army in Flanders. Haig convinced Wilson that without substantial French reinforcements, Plumer could not hold on for another 48 hours.[93] Haig told Wilson he believed Foch 'was taking only a short view of the situation (which comes so oddly from Haig!)' Milner, Wilson and Haig met Foch and Weygand at Abbeville. Foch 'brushed aside' British concerns and criticised their tactics as 'not good'. Wilson pressed Foch to flood the countryside south of Dunkirk to impede any German advance, allowing the BEF to shorten its line, but the meeting ended indecisively. The next day, Wilson wrote that: 'What was certain was that our Army would soon be reduced to impotence if the French did not directly intervene & take some punishment off us.'[94] The next day Foch said he would 'accept battle' in Flanders rather than fall back. In response Wilson wrote a formal note to 'My old friend…anxious that you should see the picture as I see it.' In a direct criticism of what he perceived as Foch's short-sightedness the CIGS wrote that it was essential 'that we face the facts as they really are and that we look a little more into the future than we have been doing.' The Allies faced two choices, stand and fight, as Foch wanted, or shorten the British line in the north where the countryside was being flooded. As Foch wanted to fight, Wilson urged him to 'bring up sufficient forces to defeat all the enemy's attacks' and to ensure that Haig

[92] Wilson diary, 13 and 15 April 1918.
[93] Haig diary, 14 April 1918, in Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig: Diaries*, p. 404.
[94] Wilson diary, 16 April 1918; Greenhalgh, *Foch*, pp. 315-6.

was in 'no doubt' as to his wishes. What was clear was that Plumer could not hold on much longer without reinforcement.[95] It was as clear a message as possible that responsibility for whatever befell the British lay with Foch. As it was the British line, although pushed back, held.[96]

Wilson continued to call for French help. At an Allied conference in Abbeville he demanded the French take an equal share of the 'punishment'. Since 21 March, 60 British divisions had suffered 300,000 casualties while the 100 French divisions had suffered just 60-70,000. 'I pointed out that if this went on … the British Army would disappear and we should lose the war.' Foch agreed to consider Haig's request for the French to help the Belgians north of Ypres. Wilson was dissatisfied: 'The attitude of Foch & the Tiger was difficult & it is clear to me that we must assert ourselves more.' Lieutenant-Colonel Edward Spiers, who was acting as liaison between Wilson and the French War Ministry, told him of a 'dangerous campaign' in the press to deprecate the British Army at the expense of the French: 'We talked it over & I am sure we must assert ourselves more. I will discuss with Milner. We must take over High Policy everywhere, command of the Mediterranean etc.'[97] He repeated this to Milner.[98] These were Wilson's first direct references in 1918 to his worries about French domination of war policy, and his conviction that his government should resist. There would be many more.

[95] Wilson correspondence, (2/24A/15), Wilson to Foch, 17 April 1918.
[96] Zabecki, *German Offensives*, pp. 204-5.
[97] Wilson diary, 27 April 1918; Spiers changed the spelling of his name to Spears in September 1918, Egremont, *Under Two Flags*, p. 81.
[98] Wilson diary, 28 April 1918.

Wilson continued to press for an agreed strategy on whether or not, if pressed, the Allied armies should stick together or lose contact, the British covering the Channel ports, the French covering Paris. Wilson asked the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Rosslyn Wemyss, for his opinion of what the loss of Calais and Boulogne would mean for the British war effort. His assessment was, wrote Wilson, 'a stupid paper & impossible to make out clearly what the Admiralty think but it is certainly not stated that the Channel is lost so I presume we could still keep our communication.'[99] Wilson persuaded the Prime Minister and Milner that British policy, if it came to it, should be to abandon the ports because the Admiralty believed the Channel would be safe. He noted: 'These are momentous decisions, & although I trust they may never have to be carried out they certainly ought to be determined.'[100] To Wilson's frustration, Foch and Haig both refused to consider the prospect of a retreat and therefore would not plan for one. Foch continued to favour 'fighting every yard but not taking long views… Haig agrees that in the last resort we should fall back to the South & I asked him specifically twice & both times he agreed.'[101]

The May meeting of the SWC was rancorous. Milner described it as 'a dog fight'.[102] Wilson 'at once' raised the question of the Channel ports and insisted on a definitive answer. Haig and Pétain favoured French and British forces remaining in contact, and the politicians agreed

[99] Wilson diary, 18, 20 April 1918.
[100] Ibid., 24 April 1918.
[101] Ibid., 26 April 1918.
[102] CAC, Hankey diary, 2 May 1918.

unanimously. Wilson's dogged determination to get the Generalissimo to agree a strategy had finally succeeded. The Allies had an agreed policy if the need arose. The fact that Wilson's fears were never put to the test may explain why the historiography has paid little attention to this aspect of the CIGS's work. It illustrates Wilson's ability think strategically while his colleagues concentrated on more immediate problems. The same meeting made Foch 'co-ordinator' of Allied forces in Italy, 'a d_____ stupid thing to do', according to Wilson.[103]

For Wilson, much of May was dominated by the government's evolving policy on Ireland, his concerns about Haig's suitability to remain in command of the BEF, and wrangling with the Americans over the use of their expanding force. As prominent was his campaign of resistance to French policy. He told Milner his fears of 'the French absorbing us, our Army, our Bases, our Mercantile Marine, our Food, Italy, Salonika etc, & I warned him once more of this real danger, which would lose us the war.' He delivered a similar message to Churchill. Sackville-West was: '…just as convinced as I am that the French mean to take us over body & soul...Numberless signs of increasing interference.'[104] The X Committee of 16 May was dominated by Wilson's fears about French policy. His specific concern was Foch's 'dispersal' of British troops to threatened parts of the French front. Despite British representations, Foch 'insisted on the brunt of the fighting being taken by British divisions. This did not mean that he was

[103] Wilson diary, 2 May 1918; TNA, CAB 28/3, War Cabinet, IC (Allied Conferences), Volume III, IC 57-59, '*Procès-verbal* of the Fifth Session, Supreme War Council, Abbéville, 1-2 May 1918'.
[104] Wilson diary, 9, 10 and 12 May 1918.

not using French divisions, but he did not put the French divisions in until the British divisions had been practically knocked out.' With Milner's support, he insisted that at minimum British divisions should be grouped together and not 'scattered about'. Lloyd George's unhelpful response was that he presumed Foch wanted the British to 'break the brunt of the attack' before using French forces. It was important the French were preserved for fighting in the summer:

> Nothing should be done which would handicap General Foch in this respect. For his part he hoped that the French would take a very big share in the battle, as he did not want the British Army to be so reduced that next year we should find ourselves the third Military Power on the Western Front.[105]

Lloyd George sent Wilson for discussions with Foch, who was eventually persuaded that any British troops moved south would be of corps strength.[106] One unit, IX Corps, had already moved to a reputedly 'quiet' sector of the French line on the Chemin des Dames. It was then badly mauled in the Germans' first offensive against the French, Operation *Blücher*, which began on 27 May.[107] Wilson saw the King who 'was much upset & ranted about the "brutes of French" & how the British Army was going to disappear.' Milner was shaken by the French performance and did not think 'the French Nation will stand a disaster. "I wish we had our Army back in England" he kept on saying. But we can't so what is the use of saying it?'[108] Milner and Wilson began to doubt French resolve: 'The

[105] TNA, CAB 23/17/2, X Committee, 16 May 1918.
[106] Wilson diary, 16, 17 and 20 May 1918; Greenhalgh, *Foch*, pp. 345-6.
[107] J.E. Edmonds, *OH: Military Operations France and Belgium, 1918, vol. 3* (London: Macmillan, 1939), pp. 30-31; Harris, *Douglas Haig,* p. 477; Zabecki, *German Offensives,* pp. 217-8.
[108] Wilson diary, 27 and 28 May 1918.

French have lost Château-Thierry & Villers Cotterêts. This latter must mean that they are not fighting. If this is so, we are done & LG & Milner at once went on that assumption & talked of ____ nonsense [sic].'[109]

The crisis coincided with a meeting of the SWC when Anglo-French relations plumbed new depths of animosity and mutual suspicion. Wilson began the day thus: 'I find it difficult to realise that there is a possibility, perhaps a probability, of the French Army being beaten! What would this mean?'[110] Clemenceau and Foch blamed the British for not providing enough men, while Lloyd George questioned French statistics. Nonetheless, Wilson supported the principle that the BEF should be kept up to establishment. French demands for immediate help, including moving troops from Salonika and Italy echoed British pleas of a month earlier when they were under attack.[111] The ill-tempered meeting, the record of which Curzon said left a 'rather disagreeable impression', ended with little resolved.[112]

Next, Wilson had to arbitrate a dispute between Haig and Foch.[113] Haig had raised a formal protest after being ordered to move three of his divisions south to the Somme. As evidence of the seriousness with which the French military position was viewed, the X Committee met twice on 5

[109] Wilson diary, 31 May 1918.
[110] Ibid., 1 June 1918.
[111] TNA, CAB 28/4, War Cabinet, IC (Allied Conferences), Volume IV, IC 64, 'Procès-verbal of the Sixth Session of the Supreme War Council, held at the Trianon Palace, Versailles, 1 June 1918'.
[112] TNA, CAB 23/6/48, War Cabinet, 5 June 1918.
[113] Woodward, *Lloyd George*, pp. 171-2; Greenhalgh, *Victory*, pp. 219-22, Callwell, *Wilson*, (vol. II), pp 105-6.

June. Wilson was 'absolutely convinced' moving troops south would seriously weaken the British line in the north where an attack was expected imminently. Haig was similarly critical of French 'fighting spirit', claiming many divisions 'won't face the enemy.'[114] Foch continued to refuse to shorten the British line, but both Wilson and Haig now thought it essential.[115] The CIGS was angry at the French reaction to the latest German offensive and convinced that 'Foch will lose the war if he goes on like this… It's simply d____ nonsense saying he won't "laché un pied" ["let go of the feet", i.e. maintain contact between the British and French armies] & then run from Chemin du Dames to Château-Thierry.'[116] Lloyd George ordered Wilson and Milner to 'insist', with Clemenceau's support if possible, that Foch rethink his plans. They were so concerned that they discussed the rate at which troops 'could be transported from France in the wake of a sudden disaster.'[117] Wilson warned Lloyd George that if Foch did not comply and allow Haig to make his own decisions about defending the ports 'then LG would get a letter from me to say the British Army would be lost.' At GHQ, Lawrence told them that Foch 'has no plan & is heading straight for disaster,' while Haig said the French were 'not fighting & therefore in his opinion we would be mad to go South & join them, but in addition he thinks it is already late.'[118] The British met Clemenceau and Foch on 7 June and concluded there had been a

[114] Haig diary, 4 June 1918, in Blake, *Haig Papers*, p. 314.
[115] TNA, CAB 23/17/7, X Committee, 5 June 1918.
[116] Wilson diary, 5 June 1918.
[117] TNA, CAB 17/8/5, X Committee, 5 June 1918; the possibility of evacuating the BEF was discussed in the House of Commons on 18 June 1918, *Hansard*, http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1918/jun/18/mr-bonar-laws-review-of-war-situation, (accessed 6 September 2016).
[118] TNA, CAB 23/17/9, X Committee, 6 June 1918; Wilson diary, 6 June 1918.

'misunderstanding'.[119] Foch explained that he had not 'ordered' Haig to move his divisions, rather to 'consider' moving them should the situation on the French front be so serious that there was no alternative.[120] Clemenceau admonished Foch for moving forces from Haig's sector without informing him: 'I never saw old Foch so non-plussed. He simply had not a word to say. Clemenceau said such a proceeding was impossible & must never happen again,' wrote Wilson.[121] The meeting reiterated that the strategic priority was for French and British forces to remain in contact; Foch would never move forces until German intentions were clear. While the issue was defused and Wilson thought the meeting had 'done a vast deal of good & has been well worth the trouble,' it was almost inevitable the new system of unity of command would throw up such disagreements.[122] As one authority has noted, 'matters would have come to a head sooner or later'.[123] From Haig's perspective it was now clear that 'the "Generalissimo" can do what he thinks right with my troops'; as a result he requested his terms of reference be amended to reflect the change.[124]

WILSON LOSES FAITH IN HAIG

The German March Offensive inevitably had consequences for Haig and his colleagues. It also had repercussions for Derby, a dedicated supporter of Haig and Robertson, whom the Prime Minister eventually decided to

[119] BLO, Milner papers, 670 (343-520) 'Record of a visit to Paris, 6-8 June 1918'.
[120] Haig diary, 7 June 1918, in Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig: Diaries*, p. 420.
[121] Wilson diary, 7 June 1918.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Greenhalgh, *Foch*, p. 368.
[124] Haig diary, 7 June 1918, in Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig: Diaries*, 7 June 1918, p. 420.

replace with Milner, his strongest Cabinet ally. Several of Haig's biographers have considered the matter from his perspective. For the most part, this has been limited to the Field Marshal's diary entries and correspondence with his wife. The abiding narrative is that Haig offered to step down if he had lost the confidence of the government, that the War Cabinet briefly considered his removal but could find no suitable alternative and shelved the idea. This is a fair but incomplete assessment. Wilson's involvement in these events has received little direct attention. Offering formal advice as CIGS, Wilson originally backed Haig's retention, albeit with misgivings. In his diary and in discussion with confidantes he was far less steadfast in his support. His doubts continued for several weeks after the March crisis to the point at which he concluded that Haig should be relieved.

The true extent of the first German attack was still unclear when Field Marshal Lord French, who since his forced resignation as commander of the BEF in late 1915 had been an implacable enemy of Haig's,[125] went to see Wilson 'mad to get Haig out of C-in-C, & said all sorts of things.' Wilson told Milner 'that Johnnie French wanted to remove Haig but that I was opposed to it at present.' Privately, Wilson castigated the 'entirely inadequate measures taken by Haig & Pétain in their mutual plans for assistance.'[126] A few days after Doullens, 'Johnnie French went bald-headed for Derby to get Haig recalled.' Wilson told his friend he thought

[125] Holmes, *Little Field Marshal*, pp. 327-8.
[126] Wilson diary, 24 March 1918.

'we ought to wait to see how he worked with Foch.' He told Derby the same. Wilson saw Lieutenant-General Tom Bridges who claimed the Army would give a 'sigh of relief' if Haig was removed.[127] The contrast in character between the mercurial French and the pragmatic Wilson is clear from these exchanges. The latter regularly 'sounded off' in his diary but he presented a more considered front in his professional dealings. What was clear to Wilson was that action had to be taken in response to the events of 21 March. In looking to make 'scapegoats of the generals' Lloyd George's gaze settled on General Sir Hubert Gough, commander of Fifth Army.[128] On the eve of the Beauvais meeting Milner told Wilson he was 'in favour of removing Gough.' Wilson agreed.[129] The next day, when Lloyd George and Wilson met Haig, the Prime Minister told him 'Gough must go.'[130] Haig supported his Army commander, refusing to condemn him before hearing Gough's defence. Lloyd George, he wrote in his diary, seemed a distrustful 'cur.'[131] In discussion with Wilson he insisted on 'an order to remove him, which I told him we would send. He wants Cavan in [Gough's] place but I told him he could not have him, he must ask for someone else.'[132] Wilson helped Derby write the order summoning Gough home because his troops had 'lost confidence in him'.[133] In fact, Haig's diary entry says he told Gough it was the Cabinet which had decided his fate.[134]

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[127] Wilson diary, 29 March 1918.
[128] Woodward, *Lloyd George*, p. 292.
[129] Wilson diary, 2 April 1918.
[130] Ibid., 3 April 1918.
[131] Haig diary, 3 April 1918, in Blake, *Haig Papers*, p. 301, and Haig diary 3, 4 April, in Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig: Diaries*, p. 397-8.
[132] Wilson diary, 3 April 1918.
[133] Ibid., 4 April 1918.
[134] Haig diary, 5 April 1918, in Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig: Diaries*, p. 398.

Regardless of the almost inevitable demise of Gough, Wilson's doubts about the British C-in-C himself were exacerbated by his trip to France. Lloyd George had complained to Wilson that Haig was 'not the least grateful' about the agreement to send 120,000 American troops per month to France and was a 'fool'. The CIGS told Lawrence that Robertson was:

> …principally to blame for this disaster because in 2 years of almost absolute power he had never insisted on treating the whole line as one which was a sure sign of inferior generalship, but that DH was also to blame for refusing the subscribe some Divs to the Gen Reserve, & that the politicians were to blame for nor producing more men.

Wilson questioned Haig as to why Gough had not defended the line of the River Somme:

> He said he did not know. He seems to me to have lost grip of the situation. He took the most languid interest in the new American scheme for which I gave LG full credit. He can't understand why Foch does not attack ... I said I supposed Foch was delaying because he had not got enough guns up yet. DH is a very stupid man.'[135]

It seems an unreasonably harsh verdict, considering the stress Haig and his team was under at this point. At the War Cabinet the next day, Lloyd George attacked Lawrence as a:

> …very ordinary person & quite unfit to be Chief of Staff. Suddenly Smuts chimed in & said Haig has proved his complete unfitness for C-in-C. ... There was no doubt that the feeling of the Cabinet was I think unanimously ag[ains]t Haig & the whole of GHQ. There was no question that all confidence is lost. I said very little.

[135] Wilson diary, 3 April 1918.

Despite expressing doubts in his diary, Wilson protested that he had already removed Gough and had called for a report from Haig. He 'deprecated further action without further information.' The CIGS was 'ordered to ponder' and make proposals the next day.[136] Despite the pressure from the politicians, Milner told Wilson twice in 24 hours that he was in favour of Haig's removal, he refused to be drawn.[137] Haig, aware that his future lay in the balance, offered to resign if the War Cabinet decided it wanted someone else.[138] Wilson recorded that: 'LG asked me if I did not think we ought to take Haig at his word but I said that failing some really outstanding personality[,] & we have none[,] I thought we ought to wait for Haig's report.'[139]

Over the next month, apart from candid conversations with Milner, the politician he trusted most, Wilson kept his own counsel. His diary records that he listened to the views of several soldiers and statesmen, all of whom were critical of Haig, but he declined to make a recommendation on the C-in-C's future. Instead, he supported Haig's views on Anglo-French strategy, especially the need to avoid the Allied armies being split apart. By the second week in May, with Foch in the ascendant as Allied Generalissimo, Wilson finally decided to recommend bringing Haig home. The precise reasons for the timing and the rationale of this decision, nearly two months after the start of Operation *Michael*, remain unclear. This was a relatively quiet period; the Lys Offensive against the British was over and

[136] Wilson diary, 4 April 1918.
[137] Ibid., 4, 5 April 1918.
[138] Sheffield, *The Chief*, p. 280.
[139] Wilson diary, 8 April 1918.

the first major German attack on the French on the Aisne still a month away. It is possible that Wilson saw the lull as the first real opportunity to act. What is clear is that he spent most of April and May dissatisfied with Haig's performance and, at times, his fighting spirit. After a dispiriting conversation with Foch, who thought 'nothing' of Rawlinson and believed Plumer ought to become C-in-C, Wilson recorded:

> There is no doubt in my mind that Haig is tired, that he has no desire, that he is almost a beaten man, that he is always turning to a Peace to get him out of his difficulties – he spoke to me about peace 2 or 3 times again today – and that I really begin to think that he had better be relieved.[140]

This was a critical day for the BEF, with a major enemy assault in the La Bassée sector, but at a time when several members of Britain's political leadership took a pessimistic view of the war, Wilson was unwilling to accept the same from the C-in-C.[141] A week later, with the German Flanders offensive in full swing, Wilson thought Haig was 'very passive, & has not got full grip of the situation nor any life and drive. In many ways there is no doubt he ought to be removed but there is no outstanding man to replace him except Plumer & I doubt that change worth doing.'[142] Wilson thus dismissed both the highly competent Plumer, and, by omission, his old friend Rawlinson. It is unclear what Wilson considered necessary to make a 'better' commander than Haig. Wilson's diary noted on several occasions that in the light of Foch's elevation, Haig's role had diminished and thus, by implication, the latter might be content to accept another role. Arguably, Wilson was 'rehearsing' this argument to soften the

[140] Wilson diary, 9 April 1918.
[141] Millman, *Pessimism*, pp. 241-249.
[142] Wilson diary, 16 April 1918.

blow for Haig if he had to be removed. Study of his diary and correspondence leads this author to suggest an alternative reason for Wilson concluding that Haig had to go. By May 1918 Milner and Lloyd George were considering replacing Haig with a 'better' general. Wilson had rejected the notion because, in his view, a more suitable officer could not be found.[143] Conceivably, Wilson proposed removing Haig from command of the British armies on the Western Front to prevent Robertson's effective rehabilitation and appointment to the vacant post of Commander-in-Chief of Home Forces. Professional disagreement between Wilson and Robertson took on a personal dimension in early 1918. In the build-up to Robertson's removal as CIGS, Wilson's diary references became critical and disdainful. Once Wilson was ensconced at Robertson's desk he did nothing to help his predecessor find suitable alternative employment, letting him languish as GOC of Eastern Command, the lowly post to which he had been assigned on his forced resignation.[144] The decision to appoint Lord French, who had been C-in-C Home Forces since his return from France in 1915, as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, freed up his prestigious, and influential, post at Horse Guards.[145] It is clear from Wilson's diary that he was opposed to Robertson replacing French. A press campaign in April 1918 blamed Lloyd George for sacking Robertson and, by implication, imperilling the war effort on the eve of the

[143] In January 1918, Hankey and Smuts went to France to assess possible alternatives to Haig, but could only suggest II Corps Commander Lieutenant-General Claud Jacob, Sheffield, *The Chief*, p. 280.
[144] Woodward, *MCWR*, p. 248.
[145] French was appointed on 11 May 1918, Holmes, *Little Field Marshal,* p. 338.

German offensives.[146] The calls in Fleet Street for Wully to be reinstated as CIGS were seen by his successor as a criticism of himself.

French, who made no effort to disguise his long-standing enmity towards both Haig and Robertson, realised that if he were to go to Dublin, Robertson might succeed him and 'he hates this'.[147] French suggested bringing Haig home to replace him 'otherwise it will fall to Robertson!' Wilson put the idea to Milner who was 'rather taken' with it but told him it was 'for him & LG to decide.' Later the AG, Macready, a Robertson ally, told Wilson he wanted Wully to replace French. Unsurprisingly, his diary entry ended 'What a day for my birthday.'[148] Wilson, Milner and the Prime Minister then discussed French's successor: 'I, personally, favour bringing Haig home. His position now under Foch is very different, his Divisions are dwindling, & he has lost much of the confidence of the Army.' Unfortunately for Wilson's plans, Milner favoured Robertson.[149] The following day Robertson's 'alter-ego' Major-General Sir Frederick Maurice committed career suicide by accusing Lloyd George of lying about the numbers of British troops available to meet the German onslaught.[150] The 'Maurice Affair' is discussed exhaustively in the historiography and will not be repeated here.[151] Its significance for this thesis is that Wilson and Milner saw Robertson and his supporters as the instigators of Maurice's

[146] Woodward, *Robertson*, pp. 206-210.
[147] Wilson diary, 3 May 1918.
[148] Ibid., 5 May 1918.
[149] Ibid., 6 May 1918.
[150] Woodward, *Robertson*, p. 208.
[151] Maurice, *The Maurice Case*; also, David R. Woodward, 'Did Lloyd George Starve the British Army of Men Prior to the German Offensive of 21 March 1918?', *The Historical Journal*, vol. 27 (1), (1984), pp. 241-252.

action.[152] The last thing Wilson wanted was the former CIGS in control of home defence with all that meant for manpower resources in other theatres, particularly France, and Ireland.[153] Even the King, a loyal supporter of Robertson, tackled Wilson about the government's position:

> He deprecated Maurice's action but was loud in abuse of LG & of Curzon, who was here yesterday & said Maurice's letter was part of an intrigue. The King said that LG was always trying to get rid of Robertson to which I agreed & said LG's efforts to get rid of R was only equalled by R's efforts to get rid of LG. I told the King what I thought of the whole thing & made no concealment of my feelings. It gave him something to think about.[154]

Wilson kept up the pressure on Milner and Lloyd George to recall Haig, noting on 14 May that it was the first time in a week that he had not discussed it with them. His case, put first on 11 May and repeated to Milner 48 hours later, was that the army had 'more confidence in Plumer'. Plumer was better at organising support services behind the lines, Haig's position was significantly changed since Foch's appointment, and the C-in-C had 'lost grip'.[155] Wilson suspected that, with the fall-out from the Maurice affair still fresh in their minds, the politicians were reluctant to act against Haig:

> Milner is afraid of removing Haig & does not want to appoint Robertson to Home Command & so is in a dilemma…I realise fully that to remove Haig, even if he is put in the Horse Guards is a serious matter & I told Milner that he would be faced with hostile criticism especially as regards me for people will say that I first got Robertson out & now Haig.[156]

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[152] Robertson denied any involvement in the affair, something Milner doubted, BLO, Milner papers, Robertson to Milner, 17 May 1918, c.696/350-1, and Milner to 18 May 1918, c. 696/352; Wilson diary, 14, 18 May 1915.
[153] Despite pressing matters on the Western Front, the future for Irish politics appears prominently in Wilson's diary for this period.
[154] Wilson diary, 8 May 1918.
[155] Ibid., 11, 13 May 1918.
[156] Ibid., 13 May 1918.

The Prime Minister favoured getting Robertson out of London by making him C-in-C India, in place of General Sir Charles Monro who would take over command of the Home Forces. By implication Haig would stay in post, but this fell through.[157] Wilson then went to see Haig and 'told him I had suggested to LG that he should bring him (DH) home to succeed Johnnie because of the altered status of C-in-C here. He did not say anything, but said the way I was being criticised was hateful.'[158] At first sight this frankness seems odd in a soldier so often accused of mendacity and double-dealing. In fact, what Wilson had to say came as no surprise to Haig, who almost a fortnight earlier had been told by his wife that London gossips were discussing him as successor to French.[159] Haig's recollection of the meeting at GHQ was that Wilson seemed 'anxious to do the right thing', and that the Cabinet did not 'desire to replace me in France'.[160] Towards the end of the month Milner made clear he wanted Robertson to succeed French. While Wilson believed 'on the whole' that Haig would have been the better choice, with Plumer becoming C-in-C 'I don't feel sufficiently strong & clear to <u>really</u> press it.'[161] Robertson became C-in-C Home Forces two days later.[162] 'I confess I don't like it,' wrote Wilson, 'I have no opinion of Robertson as a soldier.'[163]

[157] CAC, Hankey diary, 15 May 1918; Wilson diary, 16, 17 May 1918.
[158] Ibid., 20 May 1918; Haig diary, 20 May 1918, Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig: Diaries*, p. 415.
[159] Ibid., Haig to Lady Haig, 11 May 1918, p. 412.
[160] Ibid., Haig diary, 20 May 1918, p. 415.
[161] Wilson diary, 28 May 1918.
[162] Becke, *Order of Battle of Divisions,* p. 7.
[163] Wilson diary, 30 May 1918.

What is clear is that Wilson took a much more sustained and interventionist role in the debate about Haig's future than the historiography acknowledges. Unsurprisingly, considering the date of publication, Callwell's biography omitted all but a few choice criticisms of Haig. Jeffery, Wilson's modern political biographer, made no mention of it. Haig scholars have also underplayed Wilson's role. John Terraine, Gary Mead and J.P. Harris omitted these events in their biographies of the Field Marshal, while Walter Reid incorrectly stated that 'once and only once' did Wilson suggest replacing Haig.[164] Sheffield noted Haig's vulnerability at this time and related Wilson's apparent duplicity at Montreuil on 20 May, but not the ongoing campaign Wilson had waged behind the scenes.[165]

CONCLUSION

As this chapter has shown, Wilson's role in establishing the principle, and mechanism, for unity of command of the Allied forces in France and Flanders, was greater than has previously been acknowledged. His was an influential voice in the decision to appoint Foch Generalissimo, working in close co-operation with both Milner and Haig. Once Foch was in post, Wilson continued to perform his soldier-diplomat role, soothing tensions between Lloyd George and Clemenceau while maintaining an, admittedly, often strained dialogue with Foch. Although Wilson and Foch disagreed often and argued robustly, their friendship, and mutual recognition of the

[164] John Terraine, *Douglas Haig: The Educated Soldier* (London: Cassell, 2005 [1963]); Gary Mead, *The Good Soldier: The Biography of Douglas Haig* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007), Harris, *Haig*; Walter Reid, *Architect of Victory: Douglas Haig* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2006), p. 438.
[165] Sheffield, *The Chief*, p. 280.

invaluable nature of the Alliance, kept the entente together at its most critical point. During the next few weeks Wilson found himself embroiled in the business of the Imperial War Cabinet (IWC), much of it concerning strategy for 1919 and beyond, one which once again exposed Anglo-French tensions. This is discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SIX

WILSON AND BRITISH GRAND STRATEGY

This chapter re-evaluates the impact of Wilson's views on grand strategy in late 1917 and 1918, and concludes that it was more significant than has so far been acknowledged. The military theorist Basil Liddell Hart defined 'grand strategy' thus: '…while the horizon of strategy is bounded by the war, grand strategy looks beyond the war to the subsequent peace. It should not only combine the various instruments, but so regulate their use as to avoid damage to the future state of peace – for its security and prosperity.' The 'various instruments' which had to be considered, included a state's economic and manpower resources, the balancing of military and industrial priorities, and diplomacy.[1] More recently, Brock Millman refined the definition to a dynamic 'political-military amalgam which seeks to qualify how war aims will be achieved with the means at hand': in short, practising the art of the possible with the future to the fore.[2] Earning the confidence of Lloyd George, Wilson maintained Britain's primary strategic focus on the Western Front. Other theatres were considered from a long-term imperial perspective. Wilson differed from Haig, whose focus was constrained by the nature of his command, in that he had a strategic vision that went beyond France and Belgium. His predecessor Robertson took a broader view than Haig, but the pressures on the BEF on the Western Front meant that other theatres took second place, with little attention paid to long term regional objectives. Like both, Wilson never doubted that the

[1] B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach*, 3rd Edition (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), p. 336.
[2] Millman, 'Counsel of Despair', p. 241.

primary theatre was the Western Front and that the principal enemy was Germany. Where his thinking diverged was in seeing the war more 'holistically'. For Wilson, action in other theatres was not – as it was for Lloyd George – an end in itself. He never believed that 'knocking away the props' from beneath Germany, by eliminating her allies, would lead to victory. Action away from the Western Front only found real favour with Wilson, especially once he was CIGS, if it was designed to frustrate a clear German threat, or if it was likely to protect or strengthen Britain's post-war imperial hegemony.

Several of the Joint Notes produced by the PMRs during Wilson's time at Versailles concerned future war policy. Joint Note (JN)1 was essentially a rewrite of his paper to the British War Cabinet of 20 October 1917. JN12, of January 1918, echoed the active-defensive tenets of JN1. It differed in favouring a 'decisive' offensive in Palestine, where Allenby had achieved unexpected success, or elsewhere in the Middle East. It advocated harassing the Turks, if possible, in Armenia, and opportunities to disrupt the Central Powers' activities in the Caucasus and Black Sea region were also favoured. These were ambitious goals, but, JN12 specifically ruled out reinforcing campaigns elsewhere at the expense of France and Flanders. This thesis suggests that in compiling JN12 Wilson, always a 'Westerner' at heart, satisfied both Lloyd George's instinctive desire to see the prospect of action in the Middle East, while insisting any such campaign had to be achieved within current resources. It was a difficult balance to strike, but one typical of Wilson's 'political' character.

While the Allies faced successive German offensives in the west in spring 1918, Wilson formulated policy for the following year. He believed the war could be won in 1919, in contrast to some of his colleagues who expected the conflict to drag on into 1920. To Lloyd George's irritation, his proposal was for a crushing offensive in the west. Britain would play a subsidiary role to the French and Americans, preserving British forces to protect and preserve her imperial priorities. The fact that his recommendations were never put to the test may be one reason Wilson's contribution to this strategic policy debate has been somewhat overlooked in the historiography.

JOINT NOTE 12: 1918 CAMPAIGN

JN12 was a development of JN1. Entitled '1918 Campaign', it repeated the SWC policy that the Allies stand on the defensive in the west, and proposed a 'decisive' offensive in the Middle East, in Palestine or Mesopotamia.[3] Woodward, although allowing for Wilson's influence in its creation, dismissed it as little more than him 'taking his instructions directly from the prime minister'.[4] In fact, it was Wilson who was the architect of this new direction for Allied strategy; one at odds with the War Office and Haig, with Lloyd George the eager listener. David French acknowledged the JN12's importance, but again Wilson's role was characterised as that of messenger rather than initiator.[5] Hughes, while agreeing with

[3] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 12, 21 January 1918.
[4] Woodward, *Lloyd George*, pp. 243-4.
[5] French, *Strategy*, pp. 189-191.

Robertson's view that advances in Palestine were 'not a threat' to the Ottoman Empire, and thus unlikely to change the course of the war, overlooked Wilson's insistence on the need for unity of action at the strategic and political levels.[6] Jeffery summarised JN12 and observed that it 'very significantly' argued for the whole of the Allied front in the west to be treated as one strategic field of action, but Wilson's contribution was not examined in detail.[7] This chapter fills this historiographical gap, and argues that the co-operative strand in the paper, emphasised in the section on a proposed offensive in the Middle East, was of major importance for the future. JN12 focussed on theatres away from the Western Front, embodying Wilson's political and military, or 'grand strategic', vision. He strove to develop a formalised inter-Allied approach to policy making in the west while articulating a framework for Britain's future strategy in a region crucial to its imperial hegemony.

JN12 examined opportunities for 'a decisive or, at any rate, far-reaching success' in any peripheral theatres.[8] The Second Session of the SWC called on the PMRs to consider the nature of the campaigns to be undertaken in 1918.[9] Clemenceau left Wilson and his colleagues in little doubt of what their conclusions ought to be. By this stage in the war, manpower was key and it was essential to ensure sufficient shipping to

[6] Hughes, *Allenby*, p. 62.
[7] Jeffery, *Wilson*, p. 214.
[8] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 12, 21 January 1918, p. 1.
[9] TNA, CAB 28/3, IC (Allied Conferences) Series, Volume III, IC-36, Supreme War Council '*Procès-verbal* of the Second Session of the Supreme War Council, 1 December 1917, p. 10.

enable the build-up of American forces in Europe. Clemenceau told the PMRs to ensure 'that the conservation of man-power shall not be overlooked'. The war had become 'largely one of exhaustion. It may be that victory will be achieved by endurance rather than by military decision.'[10] While the final objective remained 'the overthrow of Prussian militarism' Clemenceau instructed Wilson and his colleagues:

> To weigh carefully whether possibly that object may not be brought nearer final achievement by the overthrow, first of all, of Germany's Allies, and the isolation of Germany; whether, in fact, the final overthrow of Germany may not best be reserved until the forces of the Allies, greatly augmented by a fully matured American army, can be focused and concentrated as a climax to the war on this final objective.[11]

Wilson's paper of 20 October 1917 had ruled out an offensive in Palestine because it was too late in the campaigning season, but Lloyd George remained wedded to the idea of significant action there. Encouraged by Allenby's capture of Jerusalem on 9 December 1917, the War Cabinet had directed the GS to consider a project for completing the conquest of the whole of Palestine, or, having achieved that, continuing to Aleppo, (350 miles away in Syria). This would cut rail links between oil-rich Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) and the rest of the Ottoman Empire.[12] Robertson's response was that neither operation could be accomplished quickly, nor without severe damage to Britain's position in the west.[13]

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[10] TNA, CAB 28/3, IC (Allied Conferences) Series, Volume III, IC-36, Supreme War Council '*Procès-verbal* of the Second Session of the Supreme War Council, 1 December 1917, pp. 10-11.
[11] Ibid., p. 11.
[12] TNA, CAB 23/4/71, War Cabinet, 13 December 1917.
[13] LHCMA, Robertson papers, 'Future Operations in Palestine, CIGS to War Cabinet, (4/5/10), 26 December 1917'.

Allenby, aware that he could expect only meagre reinforcement, wanted to continue the 'step by step' approach he had maintained since taking command of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) in June 1917.[14] He calculated that, if opposed by a force of no more than 60,000, he could conquer the majority of Palestine by mid-1918. Robertson said that the main problem facing the British was lack of reliable communications, especially railways. Casualties would be high and 'it is for serious consideration whether the advantages to be gained…are worth the cost and risk involved'.[15] He said the answer depended on whether the conquest of Palestine would put Turkey out of the war. He was clear that it would not, thanks to German domination of the Ottoman army and war policy. As a result, the GS view was that Britain would 'incur a great risk by increasing our liabilities in secondary theatres' and ought to reduce these commitments to 'a defensive minimum and concentrate all other resources in the West.'[16] Robertson urged the Cabinet to come to a decision, 'at once' in order to plan for the coming year.[17] His report was viewed with scepticism by the Prime Minister. A month earlier the CIGS had produced a report which, although it noted Allenby's significant advances in Palestine, said it was uncertain he would take Jerusalem thanks to strong Turkish opposition. Better, Robertson had said, to economise forces in the east in 1918 and concentrate on European theatres.[18] Weeks later

[14] LHCMA, Robertson papers, Appendices II, 14 December 1917, and IV, (4/5/10), 20 December 1917, Allenby to Robertson.
[15] Ibid., 4/5/10, p. 3.
[16] Ibid., pp. 3-4.
[17] Ibid., p. 4.
[18] LHCMA, Robertson papers, 'Situation in Turkey,' CIGS to War Cabinet, (4/5/9), 15 November 1917.

Allenby, with no additional troops, had entered Jerusalem in triumph. Lloyd George showed Robertson's report to Wilson 'which amounts to doing nothing there, which I can't agree to.' Wilson went to see Milner who:

> ...agrees with me that we ought to push about like the devil in the Caucasus and if possible push on in Palestine… Also we must try to get command of the Black Sea. We really must change in 1918 our puerile, useless, costly strategy of 1916 and 1917.
> This past year has been a terrible disappointment. Russia and Italy failing so disastrously. LG has today handed over to Versailles the study of all these questions and also of how we shall stand a year hence, of the Ukraine and Caucasus, of what chance we have of beating the Boches in the field in 1918 or 1919.[19]

The same day the War Cabinet instructed the PMRs to report on the 'military and strategical position in the Turkish theatre and South Russia as a whole'.[20]

Over Christmas the War Cabinet asked Robertson for his views on the latest hint of peace negotiations from the Central Powers.[21] Wully was sceptical and reiterated his belief in concentrating all available resources in the west while standing on the defensive elsewhere.[22] By spring 1918 Germany, while slightly inferior to the Allies in infantry, would be considerably superior in heavy artillery and therefore: 'It is so clearly in the enemy's interest to win a decisive success before America can intervene in force that it is only prudent to assume that he will make the attempt.'[23]

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[19] Wilson diary, 31 December 1917; TNA, CAB 23/4/82, War Cabinet 31 December 1917.
[20] TNA, CAB 23/4/82, War Cabinet 31 December 1917.
[21] Woodward, *Lloyd George*, pp. 239-240.
[22] LHCMA, Robertson papers, 'The Present Military Situation, with reference to the Proposals by the Central Powers,' Robertson to War Cabinet, (4/6/6), 29 December 1917.
[23] Ibid., pp. 5-6.

With a greater clarity than Wilson and his fellow PMRs about the timing of the German offensive, Robertson predicted that 'having regard to the necessity for sustaining the morale of his people, he will not defer his attack till after February.'[24] Robertson recalled the 'very successful' German attack at Verdun in February 1916 and concluded: 'We must be prepared for a great battle, or rather series of battles, early in the coming year...'[25]

The day before Robertson submitted this assessment, which accurately foresaw the events of March 1918, Milner summoned Wilson. Following unofficial peace feelers from Austria, the Prime Minister wanted Wilson's opinion of the Allies' chances of improving their position if the war went on. 'This is an amazing wire and looks as though much would depend on my military opinion,' he wrote.[26] He met Milner who:

> …wired for me because he & LG having no longer any faith in Robertson or Haig wanted to know my opinion. The question seems to be: "Shall we be in a better position from the military point of view in 12 months & if not why not discuss Peace Terms now."
> Milner & LG want to know my opinion. In addition, Milner told me LG is so angry with Robertson that he proposes to kick him out & put me in. As I said to Milner again – I am opposed to this, though all in favour of LG giving me more power at Versailles & reducing R from the position of a Master to that of a Servant.[27]

The next day Wilson saw Lloyd George and discussed Robertson's assessment which was:

[24] LHCMA, Robertson papers, (4/6/6), 29 December 1917, p. 7.
[25] Ibid., p. 9.
[26] Wilson diary, 28 December 1917.
[27] Ibid., 29 December 1917; BLO, Milner diary, 30 December 1918.

> …very poor... LG, Hankey and Phillip [Kerr][28] all agreed it was a miserable paper & of no possible assistance to anyone. We talked for hours. I described my present war game at Versailles & our, rough, results & LG very much interested... Very friendly to me & very hostile to Robertson & contemptuous of Haig's brains though agreeing to his being a sterling fighter.

Wilson wrote that he told Kerr that he did not want Lloyd George to remove Robertson and make him CIGS 'much better for him to keep R and gradually give Versailles more power in the large issues.' Wilson then went to see Carson and 'told him of my war game. He was a little distant but nice. He is angry with LG for his constant abuse of Robertson; in which he is quite right. A long day, but I think good work, & I hope I may save Robertson. LG said he hoped Kigg[ell] was going to be kicked out as well as Charteris & Maxwell & others.'[29] There is no reason to suppose that this comment, which undermines the impression that Wilson wanted Robertson's job at any cost, was insincere. Wilson would have no expectation of anybody reading his private journal, and at this stage he appears to have favoured the idea that Versailles would be the new centre of Allied policy making. Lloyd George and the War Cabinet found the CIGS's response wanting and put the following questions:

1. Could the General Staff foresee a victorious end to the War? If so, when and under what circumstances?
2. Did the General Staff foresee an improvement in the Allied military situation that would achieve better terms than might now be available, and if so, would it be worth the sacrifice?

[28] Philip Kerr, Lloyd George's Private Secretary, 1916-1921, Roskill, *Hankey*, p. 184.
[29] Wilson diary, 30 December 1917.

3. Could the General Staff suggest how the enemy could be prevented from taking control of the resources of South Russia?
4. Did General Staff foresee, in 1918 or 1919, the likelihood of inflicting a 'defeat that would not leave the military domination of Prussia successful and intact?'[30]

These questions précis the issues facing the British at the beginning of 1918; if there was a prospect of a negotiated peace, should Britain pursue it if military victory was impossible? While these were legitimate questions, it is hardly surprising that, as in his earlier paper, Robertson's response was an uncharacteristic exercise in bureaucratic fence-sitting. He repeated his concerns about manpower and suggested a review of resources devoted to the Royal Navy and home defence. Unless there were significant improvements in recruitment, Britain's 52 divisions in France and Italy were likely to be down to 40 by the end of the year.[31] Robertson's dilemma was that he was determined that all available resources should be devoted to offensive action on the Western Front, because he expected a major German effort there. He knew the Prime Minister favoured decisive action elsewhere, but the War Cabinet had not settled, clearly and unequivocally, on such a policy. Nor was he convinced of their willingness to support the military by turning the screw on recruitment again. When they made up their minds, he would offer his opinion; until then he would not speculate. Wilson dismissed Robertson's contribution

[30] LHCMA, Robertson papers, 'War Cabinet to CIGS' and 'CIGS to War Cabinet', (4/6/8), both dated 3 January 1918.
[31] LHCMA, Robertson papers, (4/6/8), 'CIGS to War Cabinet', 3 January 1918, pp. 5-6.

on western policy as disdainfully as Lloyd George had his CIGS's advice on Palestine. It was, he wrote, 'a miserable effort and there is no guidance in the paper at all. I hope I shall do much better than that.'[32] Wilson knew what was better; a defensive in the west and the prospect of an offensive in the east. These were given voice in JN12.

As for discussions to end the war, Germany was not interested in a general peace and its conciliatory words were aimed at the Russians.[33] At the time this was unclear, and Wilson weighed into the debate to oppose any suggestion of a negotiated settlement. In late December Lloyd George had sent Smuts to Switzerland to meet the Austrian envoy, Count Albert von Mensdorff, and assess whether there was any substance to the peace overtures. The following diary extracts from a three-day period document Wilson's level of access to senior figures and gives a flavour of the febrile atmosphere at this time. On 3 January Wilson met Bonar Law, by this time Chancellor of the Exchequer, who was 'thinking about Peace & the impossibility of improving our military situation.' Bonar Law thought the Germans might give up her gains in Belgium, France and the Balkans if given a:

> …pretty free hand on the Russian side. I don't believe a word of this, but as I said to Bonar, if she is feeling like that she must be nearly beat & if she is nearly beat, then let us beat her & have done with it…All this peace talk frightens me … Duncannon saw Esher who thinks I ought to be more in London as Milner, Haig and I are the only men who want to win right out.[34]

[32] Wilson diary, 6 January 1918.
[33] French, *Strategy*, pp. 193-212; Woodward, *Lloyd George*, p. 240.
[34] Wilson diary, 3 January 1918.

The next day he lunched with Leo Maxse, the editor of the right-wing *National Review*:

> He was full of LG's treachery in now trying to make peace... it makes me uneasy especially in view of LG's questions as to what we soldiers can do to better the situation in 1918 & if we can't better it [,] would it be better to see what terms we can make now! All this makes me uneasy & suspicious.

One of Wilson's most important relationships in this period was with Clemenceau whose elevation to the French premiership in mid-November provided Wilson with another ally, albeit one initially sceptical of the Versailles body.[35] Wilson called on Clemenceau regularly in November and December and they met privately seven times in January 1918, when Wilson and his fellow PMRs were working on their Joint Notes. While Wilson wrote admiringly of Clemenceau in his diary, it is clear the relationship was mutually beneficial. 'The Tiger' used Wilson to influence the British government. Wilson cultivated Clemenceau as a supporting voice when presenting his ideas to his political masters. The day after talking with Maxse, Wilson was summoned to see Clemenceau who was 'charming as usual'. As for the peace discussions: 'It seems to me to be a stupid thing, & we English who have suffered the least of all in the war should be the last of all the Allies to talk of Peace.' That evening Wilson saw Esher who condemned Lloyd George as 'a fool' over the Smuts

[35] They met first in December 1915. Wilson liked 'the Tiger', describing him as a 'real character and personality – one of the few I have ever met,' Wilson diary, 5 December 1915.

mission and doubted the Prime Minister 'lasting much longer'.[36] Macready, acknowledging Wilson's value as a mediator, noted that Lloyd George was 'quarrelling hard with Clemenceau, who was the first Frenchman he couldn't 'twist around his finger.'[37]

JN12: Campaign in the West

The first section of JN12 concerned the Western Front, Italy and the security of Britain. Like Wilson's initial strategy paper, it assumed that Britain was defended against 'all serious invasion' without interfering with forces overseas.[38] In other words, Wilson and his colleagues saw no need to use scarce manpower and other resources to augment home defence. In late 1917, the Home Defence Force stood at just under 401,000, including 190,000 'mobile troops' ready for overseas deployment. This was 69,000 fewer than at the start of the year, but a significant figure and one which continued to be contentious in 1918.[39] Secondly, it had been agreed, after 'the most careful and exhaustive examination, that the safety of France could also be assured'. There was an important caveat:

> In view of the weight of attack which the enemy can bring to bear upon this front, an attack which may possibly, in the opinion of the Military Representatives attain a strength of 96 Divisions, exclusive of "roulement" [rotation], they feel obliged to add that France will be safe during 1918 only under certain conditions.[40]

[36] Wilson diary, 5 January 1918.
[37] CAC, Amery diary, (AMEL 7/14), 6 January 1918.
[38] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 12, 21 January 1918, p. 1.
[39] Woodward, *Robertson*, p. 180.
[40] TNA, WO 158/57, p. 1, (original emphasis).

Allied forces should be 'continuously maintained at their present total aggregate strength, and receive the expected reinforcements of not less than two American Divisions a month.' As already discussed, Wilson was acutely aware of Britain's manpower problems. Maintaining numbers in the west was challenge enough; hardly surprising then that there would be no diversion of resources eastwards. That said, the assessment would have been music to the Prime Minister's ears, reinforcing Haig's own confident predictions of 7 January.[41] Robertson was suspicious of Wilson's motives. The day before the SWC met to discuss JN12, he sent his ADC, Lucas, to see Wilson:[42]

> He says Robertson is very much upset at our Resolution 12 "The 1918 Campaign". R[obertson] seems to think that I have drafted that paper on purpose to get him kicked out & that by underlining the conditions on which alone we are safe on this front I have thrown the whole onus on him for destroying the paper. The Monument went so far as to say "of course if you want to get rid of the CIGS…" I told him bluntly that if it wasn't for me he would have been got rid of some time ago & that I could have him removed any day I pleased.

While there was a measure of bravado in this threat, Wilson clearly felt more confident of his position *vis-à-vis* the CIGS. Nonetheless, he went to see Robertson:

> He asked why when I <u>knew</u> that our effectives could not be kept up I put in as a condition that the total aggregate of troops now in France must be maintained? I replied that … I had come to the conclusion that <u>if</u> our effectives were kept up we were safe & if not then we were not safe & that I wanted to fix the responsibility on the Prime Ministers which is where it <u>must</u> rest.
> This seemed to soothe him.[43]

[41] TNA, CAB 23/5/8, War Cabinet, 7 January 1918.
[42] Major C.C. Lucas, nicknamed 'the Monument' for his steadfast support of his chief, Woodward, *MCWR*, p. 339.
[43] Wilson diary, 28 January 1918 (original emphasis).

This is a crucial point. Wilson was acutely aware of Britain's manpower crisis. He knew Lloyd George wanted to prevent another costly offensive in the west, but believed opportunities existed in the Middle East. With typical Wilsonian subtlety, JN12 said the Western Front was safe, but only if troop numbers were maintained, with none to spare for other theatres. Robertson was far from 'soothed'. He had already taken exception to Wilson's proposal for a central reserve and an executive body to control it. On 19 December Robertson had warned the War Cabinet that its troops would soon face 'a very formidable attack'.[44] JN12 was a prime example of the government receiving contradictory advice from Wilson, something the CIGS had consistently warned of.

Less controversially, JN12 called for a 'substantial progressive increase' in artillery, machine guns, tanks and aircraft, and trained personnel. Significantly, these should be effectively co-ordinated between the Allied armies. Co-ordination was also essential to strengthen the defence 'particularly in the sectors most liable to a heavy attack'. Repeating the call for inter-allied co-operation in Joint Note 8 (Transportation)[45] the politicians were urged to improve and co-ordinate rail transportation across the Allied front. In line with Wilson's familiar refrain, the whole Allied front should be 'treated as a single strategic field of action, and the disposition of the reserves, the periodic re-arrangement of the point of junction between the

[44] TNA, CAB 23/4/76, War Cabinet, 19 December 1917.
[45] TNA, WO 158/57, 'Supreme War Council: Joint Notes', Joint Note 8, 8 January 1918.

various Allied forces on the actual front, and all other arrangements should be dominated by this consideration.'[46] In one sentence the PMRs highlighted the manpower-related problems which had dogged the Allies for months, the length of the British line, and the contentious issue of an inter-Allied reserve. It was also agreed that, if the Italian Army could be reformed, retrained and re-equipped with artillery before 1 May 1918, that front was safe also. Again, co-operation was the watchword, with the PMRs recommending improved rail transportation between Italy and France 'to secure strategic unity of action over the two theatres'.[47] If these criteria were met, the enemy could not, in 1918, 'gain a definite military decision in the main theatres which would enable him to break finally the resistance of any of the Allied Powers'.[48]

If Germany could not win in the west in 1918, what of the Allies? JN12 concluded that unless something 'improbable and unforeseeable' happened, such as the internal collapse of Germany or Austria-Hungary, or if Russia revived as a serious military contender, there was no possibility of the Allies achieving a 'final, or even a far-reaching decision' in 1918. Wilson scotched Haig's optimistic hopes for major success with another large-scale offensive around Ypres in the late spring or early summer. Although American forces were increasing, they would not make a fundamental difference in the coming year. Likewise, skinning the British armies in the 'secondary theatres' of all men apart from those needed for

[46] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 12, 21 January 1918, p. 1.
[47] Ibid., pp. 1-2.
[48] Ibid., p. 2.

local defence would not make ‘a sufficient difference in the relative position of the opposing forces to justify the hope of attaining such a decision’.[49] The paper then took on a more positive tone and urged the Allied General Staffs to plan in case ‘an unexpected favourable development should furnish an opportunity for vigorous offensive actions’. The defensive posture in the west should not be ‘merely passive in character, but be worked out definitely and scientifically, with the intention of gaining the maximum from any opportunities offered’. A supporting paper said the likely increases in forces available to the Central Powers imposed ‘an expectant attitude’ on the Allies until the AEF ‘can really come into line’. It repeated that this approach was ‘far from being passive’ and involved taking every opportunity to take the fight to the enemy while planning for a future offensive. Some basic principles would apply. No territory would be abandoned; any enemy attack would be halted and counter-attacks undertaken. Commanders were also urged to plan diversionary counter-attacks.[50] The Allied C-in-Cs were advised to ‘prepare plans of joint operations’ to meet any concerted enemy offensive. Exerting their new-found authority, the PMRs felt it was ‘highly desirable’ that any schemes should be sent to the SWC ‘which would assure the co-ordination of this combined action’.[51] Notwithstanding the opportunities presented by enemy action, rather than an overt Allied offensive strategy, the PMRs concluded that with the Russian collapse the Allies faced ‘a fundamental, though not permanent, change in the conditions upon which

[49] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 12, 21 January 1918, p. 2.
[50] TNA, WO 158/57, ‘Annexure to Joint Note 12,’ 21 January 1918, pp. 1-2.
[51] Ibid., p 2.

their strategy has to be based'. A change in the 'balance of forces' would not be achieved until 1919, with the addition of the Americans and the 'progressive exhaustion of the enemy's staying power'.[52] Wilson succeeded in getting his colleagues to support his proposals: 'A great success this morning. We had a meeting of Mil Reps … on my 1918 note. It was passed with quite insignificant alterations in 3 places. A real victory.'[53]

JN12, as might be expected of a policy document to be considered by Allied statesmen in plenary session at an international conference, was short on detail but a file of analytical reports backed it up. These are of relevance for this study because Wilson's staff produced them all. As a body, they are integral to understanding Wilson's contribution to British strategic thinking in the final months of the war. Despite this, apart from a brief résumé of one of the papers in the relevant volume of the *Official History*, they have received little attention in the historiography.[54] At the turn of 1917-18 Wilson's team played several 'war games' and examined strategic and operational questions from the Allied and enemy perspectives. A third group considered manpower, communications and logistics issues.[55] Wilson demonstrated the war game to a string of visitors, beginning with Robertson on 10 January, who was 'a good deal

[52] TNA, WO 158/57, 'Annexure to Joint Note 12,' 21 January 1918, p. 2.
[53] Wilson diary, 21 January 1918; Amery diary, 21 January 1918, in Barnes and Nicholson, *Amery Diaries*, p. 201.
[54] TNA, CAB 25/68, 'Military Action to be taken in 1918 – plan of', 17 enclosures, January-February 1918; Edmonds, *OH: France and Belgium 1918*, (vol. I), pp. 79-80.
[55] The teams comprised 'A' Allied Branch, 'E' Enemy Branch, 'M' Material and Manpower Branch; IWM, Wilson diary, 3 January 1918; see Chapter Two, 'Wilson's Paper', p. 54.

knocked about by what he saw'. Wilson put this down to the fact that 'he has a broken staff and so has GHQ, and I have a very good one all of whom have been for years in the line and all of whom know their business.'[56] He showed the game to Pershing two days later, to Smuts who 'really was pleased', and the American PMR Bliss on 27. Wilson's friend Lieutenant-General Sir Alexander Godley (then GOC II Anzac Corps) was 'simply delighted' with the performance he saw.[57] Lawrence, who had just succeeded Charteris as Head of Intelligence at GHQ, asked for a demonstration. 'Just imagine!', wrote Wilson, 'And GHQ has never played one!'[58] On the eve of the third meeting of the SWC 'I played the War Game this morning before L[loyd] G[eorge], Milner etc and Hereward [Wake] and Bertie Studd did very well. Everyone really impressed.'[59] The next day's audience was less appreciative:

> Haig, Lawrence, Davidson,[60] Maurice and others came and we played our War Game for them. Haig was frankly bored and read some memorandum he had in his hand, and Lawrence never uttered. Tavish showed a little sense. Haig I find stupider every time I see him.[61]

Haig had already condemned Wilson's reliance on the war game as 'laughable but for the seriousness of it…'[62] His irritation appears to have been directed against Wilson and his colleagues rather than a contempt for the war game concept. One study has described Wilson's use of the

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[56] Wilson diary, January 1918.
[57] Ibid., 12, 16, 27 January, 4 February 1918.
[58] Ibid., 10 January 1918.
[59] Ibid., 29 January 1918.
[60] Major-General Sir John 'Tavish' Davidson, Head of Operations at GHQ.
[61] Wilson diary, 30 January 1918; Amery diary, 30 January 1918, in Barnes and Nicolson, *Amery Diaries*, p. 202.
[62] Haig diary, 14 January 1918, in Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig: Diaries*, p. 372.

war game as 'novel'.[63] In fact, known as 'Kriegsspiel', it was used widely in the pre-War German Army and was a feature in British General Staff exercises as early as 1905.[64] Haig organised a war game as part of a Staff Ride, while Director of Staff Duties.[65] Wilson's exercises, informed by intelligence data provided by the War Office, influenced the reports which accompanied JN12 submitted to the SWC at the end of January 1918. One of the most significant, produced by 'E' or 'Enemy' Branch, considered a western offensive from the German perspective.[66] This paper said German divisions had begun transferring from Russia and Italy sooner than expected and there were now known to be 169 on the Western Front with the actual total 'possibly' 185. These were opposed by 166 Allied divisions. The 'maximum German effort', an attack by 110 divisions, would be possible between 1 May and 1 June over a 55 kilometre front. By 1 July, the Germans would have a superiority of 37 divisions and 400 heavy guns.[67] Woodward, dismissed the war game as 'interesting though hardly fruitful' and said Wilson was 'wide of the mark' in suggesting 1 May as the best time for a German offensive.[68] In fact, the

[63] Chris Baker, '"Embusqués of the worst type, living among the fleshpots of Paris" The British Permanent Staff at the Supreme War Council', *Stand To!*, (100), June 2014, p. 112.
[64] Robert T. Foley, 'Preparing the German Army for the First World War: The Operational Ideas of Alfred von Schlieffen and Helmuth von Moltke the Younger, *War & Society*, vol. 22 (2), (2004): pp. 1-25; Brown, *Logistics*, p. 29.
[65] Harris, *Men Who Planned the War*, p. 22.
[66] 'The General Situation with Notes on a German Offensive in France', submitted 1 January 1918, updated 28 January 1918, in TNA, CAB 25/68, 'Military Action to be taken in 1918 – plan of'.
[67] TNA, CAB 25/68, 'Military Action to be taken in 1918 – plan of', 'The General Situation with Notes on a German Offensive in France', Appendix Z, 1 January (revised 28 January) 1918.
[68] Woodward, *Lloyd George*, p. 243 and p. 251 (n. 103); see also G.A.B. Dewar, & J.H. Boraston, *Sir Douglas Haig's Command 1915-1918* (2 vols.) (London: Constable, 1922), (vol. II) pp. 76-7, and John Charteris, *Field-Marshal Earl Haig* (London: Cassell, 1929), pp. 301-3.

report by ‘E’ Branch was typically nuanced. It said that the major German offensive would best be postponed to May or June when ‘the greatest superiority is attained and the weather is suitable’ with preparations being started immediately. However, if preparations ‘are already to some extent in hand, it is possible that the offensive might commence on 1 March, provided that severe weather does not cause a postponement or preclude preparations meanwhile.’ At the beginning of March sufficient forces would be available, offering an advantage of five divisions but an inferiority of 600 heavy guns. The enemy position would continue to improve such that it would be: ‘…open to the Germans to commence their offensive on 1 March, but from a purely military point of view it would be better to postpone it to 1 May when they have a superiority of about 20 divisions over the Allies.’ American arrivals were slower than expected and only 10 divisions would be in place by 1 June; it had been calculated initially that there would be 15 divisions available by 1 July. On that date, the Germans would have 96 divisions in reserve, their maximum possible complement in 1918 and ‘it would be to their advantage, other things being equal, to postpone their great offensive there until they can be certain of delivering a smashing blow’.[69] In other words, Wilson did not incorrectly predict 1 May as the date of the major German offensive. Instead, he hedged his bets and produced evidence which showed it was possible from the

[69] TNA, CAB 25/68, ‘Military Action to be taken in 1918’ – plan of’, Appendix Z, p. 2, (original emphasis).

beginning of March, a view supported by his friend Rawlinson, with an increasing advantage for the enemy until the end of June.[70]

Where Wilson and his colleagues were wrong was the likely location of the offensive. Three potential sectors were identified. The first, between Bethune and Arras, would 'secure advantages far superior to those to be gained by an attack elsewhere'. An attack there, due to the short distances between this sector and the BEF's bases at the Channel ports, would give 'immediate and possibly decisive results'. Other sectors offering a 'reasonable chance of success' were south of St Quentin between Reims and Ville sur Tourbe or between Nancy and Luneville, west of Strasbourg. It was concluded that the German attack would take place between Bethune and Arras, with subsidiary or feint attacks east of Reims and/or near Nancy to draw in Allied reserves. In fact, the first blow of the German 'Spring Offensive', was struck from just south of Arras, to La Fere, south of the Somme.[71]

JN12: Eastern Theatres

With no hope of victory in the west in 1918, JN12 then considered possible action in other theatres 'which may enable us to secure a decision far-reaching in its effect upon the political situation in the Near East and in Russia, both during and after the war, and valuable in paving the way

[70] CAC, Rawlinson journal, (RAWLN 1/9), 13 January 1918.
[71] Zabecki, *German Offensives*, p. 119.

towards a subsequent definitive decision against the enemy's main armies.'[72] This section focussed, predictably enough considering the British Cabinet's long pre-occupation with matters in the Middle East, on proposals for campaigns against the Ottoman Empire. The PMR's ruled out offensive actions in the Balkans, reiterating the position outlined in their Joint Note 4, conceding the possibility of giving ground but preserving the integrity of mainland Greece and, if possible, Salonika.[73]

Wilson argued that Ottoman forces in the Middle East had dwindled to '250,000 men at the utmost', were overstretched and in a state of 'almost complete material and moral exhaustion'.[74] Thus, opportunities existed in either Palestine or Mesopotamia 'to inflict such a crushing series of defeats upon the Turkish armies as would lead to the final collapse of Turkey and her elimination from the war and would…have the most far-reaching result upon the general military situation.' It might allow the Allies to link up with resistance elements in Romania and Southern Russia. Even without such a 'crushing' series of victories, Germany would have no choice but to reinforce Turkey, diverting resources from the Western Front. Such a success, even if limited, would 'definitely liberate the Arab regions of the Ottoman Empire from the Turkish yoke'.[75] To this point the actions proposed resembled a re-hash of the standard 'knocking away the props'

[72] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 12, 21 January 1918, pp. 2-3.
[73] Ibid., p. 3; see Chapter Three, p. 158.
[74] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 12, pp. 3.
[75] Ibid.

debate which had never strayed far from the British agenda.[76] Hughes characterised the fall of Jerusalem on as the next step in Lloyd George's 'way of redirecting strategy and diverting troops from France'.[77] In fact, the PMRs rejected any suggestion of diverting troops from the Western Front to do the job. While favouring offensives in the east they accepted that 'in view of the potential menace to the Western Front' there could be 'no question of a transfer of troops on any considerable scale from the Western to the Eastern theatre of operations'. Allied forces in Palestine and Mesopotamia were already superior enough 'to justify the hope that successful operations can be carried out with these forces providing they are maintained at full strength.'[78] There might be opportunities for 'minor reinforcements' by moving 'superfluous' cavalry units from France, curtailing British operations in East Africa, raising new units in India or in the French colonies. If the enemy made no serious offensive in the Balkans, and the organisation of the Greek Army made sufficient progress, one or two British divisions might transfer from Salonika.

When JN12 was debated at the SWC Clemenceau, in a fine example of political grandstanding, said he supported the Western Front element of the proposal but not that concerning the Middle East. Ignoring Wilson's

[76] Plans for securing the Gallipoli Peninsula to allow British warships access to the Dardanelles and the Sea of Marmara were first discussed by Churchill in late August 1914, Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill, 1914-1916* (vol. III), (London: Heineman, 1971), esp. pp. 200-204.
[77] Hughes, *Allenby*, p. 60.
[78] TNA, WO 158/57, 21 January 1918, pp. 3-4.

overt assurance in his paper about no additional troops for the theatre, Clemenceau:

> …insisted that the security of the Western front overrode all other considerations…He protested against embarking on this Eastern adventure, when so dreadful a danger was imminent near to Paris itself.[79]

Lloyd George agreed and asserted that the British government had 'no intention of diverting forces from the Western front or in any way relaxing its efforts to maintain the safety of that front, which it regards as a vital interest of the whole Alliance.'[80] The key Allied operational challenge was not dislodging Turkish forces, but following up any initial success by converting 'their retreat into a rout and final annihilation'. For this they would need to build railway infrastructure complete with rolling stock, plus the opening and improvement of coastal bases for supplies. The PMRs accepted that the effort required was 'a great one' but upon it depended 'the whole prospect of achieving any decisive result for the Allied cause in 1918'. Thus: 'Looking upon the resources in material and technical skill possessed by the Allies, not only in Europe, but in Egypt, India the British Dominions, and the United States, the effort should not be beyond the compass of our powers.'[81] Avoiding any detailed suggestions as to how this logistical challenge might be met, the Note called for an improvement in supply lines via the Suez Canal. It identified the importance of aviation

[79] TNA, CAB 28/3, IC (Allied Conferences) Series, Volume III, IC-40, Supreme War Council '*Procès-verbal* of the Second Meeting of the Third Session of the Supreme War Council, 31 January 1918, p. 13.
[80] TNA, CAB 28/3, IC, '*Procès-verbal* of the Third Meeting of the Third Session of the Supreme War Council, 1 February 1918, p. 25.
[81] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 12, 21 January 1918, p. 4.

in any campaign in the region in 1918. The Allies had air superiority and 'the necessary measures should be taken to maintain and, if possible, increase it'. Strategic air bases would have to be created in Cyprus and the Aegean and the organisation of naval air services for concentrated strategic offensives, were 'essential elements in any scheme of serious operations against Turkey'.[82] The basis of this note was a study by Amery.[83] It suggested that the best way to assist anti-Bolshevik forces in Southern Russia would be by defeating the Turks in Palestine and gaining control of the Black Sea. While Wilson and his colleagues - Amery had no combat experience - can be reasonably accused of over-simplification, if not naïveté, in their blithe assumptions about military operations, they were on safer ground with the political elements of the proposals. Military action alone was not sufficient, the PMRs believed. They were 'convinced of the necessity that strategy and policy should go absolutely hand in hand'. What was needed was 'a definite, co-ordinated and vigorous political offensive both among the non-Turkish races of the Ottoman Empire and among the Turks themselves'. Conscious of the tension which existed between Britain and France over their individual spheres of influence in the region, the paper warned that:

> Any lack of coherence on the part of the Foreign Offices [of the Allied powers] in dealing with the political problems directly or indirectly connected with the Near Eastern situation, any evidence of mutual jealousy or of individual self-seeking, will be bound to prejudice not only the future settlement but the actual military operations.

[82] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 12, 21 January 1918, pp. 4-5.
[83] TNA, CAB 25/68, 'Military Action to be taken in 1918 – plan of', 4 January 1918, 'The Turkish and South Russian Problem'.

This element of JN12, central as it was to Wilson's philosophy of the fundamental importance of effective inter-Allied co-operation, has been overlooked in the historiography and therefore merits reproduction in full:

> The aspects upon which stress has been laid in the preceding paragraphs emphasises the need for the most energetic co-operation and the closest co-ordination not only of the Allied Military forces in Palestine, Mesopotamia and Armenia, but also of the Allied Naval and Air forces along the whole coast of Asiatic Turkey, of the local Governments in Egypt, India, Cyprus, or from whatever country materials, supplies or labour can be furnished, and not least, of the Allied Foreign Offices. It is essential to the success of the offensive against Turkey that it should be envisaged not as a series of disconnected operations, but as a single co-ordinated scheme whose object is to eliminate one of the Enemy Powers from the War.[84]

It was a theme Wilson continued to pursue, and which dominated his strategic plan for 1919. The SWC's acceptance of this strategy represented a triumph for Wilson. When the delegates moved to approve the resolution, Robertson intervened to say that he 'did not agree with some of the statements made in Note 12 of the Military Representatives, or with some of the inferences drawn in regard to a campaign against Turkey'. 'Wully' was aware of the risk he was running by making this intervention, acknowledging he was not a member of the SWC. Nonetheless he felt compelled to say that the entente 'ought to adopt a defensive policy in all secondary theatres, and to keep no more troops there than were necessary'. He also believed that the resolution in favour of 'a decisive offensive against Turkey' was 'not a practical plan and that

[84] TNA, WO 158/57, Joint Note 12, 21 January 1918, p. 5.

to attempt it would be very dangerous and detrimental to our prospects of winning the war.'[85] He objected in vain and the Joint Note was accepted. As has already been discussed, the German Spring offensives made JN12 irrelevant, but it remains a valuable indicator of Wilson's strategic thinking.

'BRITISH MILITARY POLICY 1918-1919'[86]

After his influential role in the establishment of Allied Unity of Command, Wilson spent much of the second quarter of 1918 negotiating with French and American commanders over troop allocations and strategic priorities; a frustrating and sometimes fruitless endeavour. By mid-1918 the German effort in the west was losing impetus and in July Lloyd George asked his military advisers for their views on Allied policy for 1919. In Wilson's absence Lloyd George quizzed the Deputy CIGS (DCIGS), Major-General Charles 'Tim' Harington. The Prime Minister was irritated to hear that Foch was already planning western offensives dominated by AEF divisions. The DCIGS, who had only been in the job for two months, volunteered that the GS was considering a major offensive on the Western Front of up to 70 divisions, 20 of them British, involving large formations of tanks. Lloyd George asked if operations in other theatres had been considered: 'He asked if the General Staff were sure that the Germans were not going to break off operations on the Western front and go elsewhere, for example to Russia...Would they merely go on hammering at the Western front, or

[85] TNA, CAB 28/3, IC (Allied Conferences) Series, Volume III, IC-40, Supreme War Council '*Procès-verbal* of the Third Meeting of the Third Session of the Supreme War Council, 1 February 1918, p. 25.
[86] TNA, CAB 25/85, Supreme War Council, British Secretariat, Papers and Minutes, 'British Military Policy, 1918-1919', 25 July 1918, (hereafter CAB 25/85).

would they follow the German lead?' Had they considered 'knocking out' Austria or Turkey? Would it not be possible to get rid of Germany's Allies before concentrating on Germany herself? According to the Prime Minister, if the Americans concentrated a great Army on the Western Front next year, 'it might be possible for our Army to follow out its traditional rôle of operating on the outskirts of the war area.' Was anybody studying this? Harington assured him they were.[87] In fact, as Lloyd George well knew, since he arrived at the War Office in February, Wilson had spent time studying options for outlying theatres. Operations aimed at either distracting German resources from France and Flanders, at minimum cost, or/and protecting British imperial interests, had been high on the agenda. Policy outlines for these theatres comprised a significant part of Wilson's subsequent strategy document. The fifth and final major German offensive on the Western Front, Operation '*Marneschutz-Reims',* had begun on 15 July, only to grind to a halt a few days later. It meant that Wilson could finish his report. Wilson's latest biographer provided a summary of the findings of the 31-page document.[88] A more detailed analysis follows, which throws new light on Wilson's independence of thought and broad strategic vision.

Strategy for the Western Front

Lloyd George was 'bitterly disappointed with Wilson's purely "Western Front" attitude and described his report as simply "Wully *redivivus*"

[87] TNA, CAB 23/17/19, X Committee, 1 July 1918.
[88] Jeffery, *Wilson*, pp. 225-6.

[reborn].'[89] The Prime Minister was over-simplifying a detailed and closely-argued document. In proposing and outlining the details of an Allied offensive on the Western Front to win the war in 1919, its strategic scope went further than he acknowledged. Wilson, this thesis has argued, was inclined to consider military strategy in a broader political perspective. His predecessor saw the world through a military lens, with the political context often relegated to the periphery. It was why Lloyd George deprecated Robertson's seemingly myopic focus and warmed to Wilson's wider vision. But, as his 1919 policy paper illustrated, Wilson was not a Lloyd George stooge. The second paragraph summarised his purpose:

> The nearer we get to the end of the war the more necessary is it to keep in mind the ultimate aspects of the situation from the British side, so that the policy of our war aims and the strategy of our war effort may harmonise in securing for the British Empire the best possible position at the dawn of peace.[90]

In other words, strategic planning for the next 18 months needed to be undertaken with the outcome in mind. Winning the peace was as important as winning the war. As Rawlinson noted after being briefed by the CIGS: 'Henry is looking at all the fronts, and wants to hold as many cards as possible when the time comes for discussing peace terms.'[91]

Wilson considered what was, he acknowledged, an increasingly unlikely outcome to the German offensives. If the enemy did drive a wedge between the Allied armies, the British would have to abandon the continent while the French were likely to be defeated. If this happened,

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[89] Hankey diary, 30 July 1918, Hankey, *Supreme Command* (vol. II), p. 830.
[90] CAB 25/85, p. 1.
[91] CAC, Rawlinson journal, (RAWLN 1/9), 30 June 1918.

Britain and the USA could continue what would become a 'maritime and economic war,' with land operations in the Middle East. Alternatively, assuming 'as we may', that the Germans were fought to a standstill, the 'immediate pre-occupation of the Allies' must be to prepare for the 'decisive phase and if necessary to detach troops to other theatres without misgivings.' To do this, Wilson recommended a series of offensives with the limited objectives of pushing the Germans away from Channel ports, the strategically important Bruay coal mines, the Amiens communications hub, and Paris. This 'margin of safety' had to be established before the end of the 1918 campaigning season and would need every man and gun. Despite knowing that the Prime Minister and Milner favoured significant operations away from the Western Front, Wilson stated: 'There is therefore no possibility of sending any divisions to operate in other theatres until this aim is accomplished.'[92]

An abiding theme of this work has been an emphasis on the overarching concern for Britain and France during the final two years of the war – the manpower shortage. As a result, the fulcrum of Wilson's report swung on timing; or as he termed it, the 'choice of the moment for supreme effort'.[93] Should the Allies make this effort in 1919 or in 1920? Wilson argued that all rested on the strength of the AEF the following summer. The War Office estimated that by June 1919 there would be 80 US divisions in France, although shortage of officers and equipment would limit the number

[92] CAB 25/85, pp. 4-6.
[93] Ibid., p. 6.

available for offensive action. Sackville-West reported that the balance of forces would be 181 Allied divisions facing 170 German, a superiority of 400,000 men. This could be boosted by another quarter of a million if 'Allied intervention in Siberia has materialised sufficiently to reconstitute an effective Eastern Front in Russia – even partially…' While this force might not be considered 'overwhelming' for offensive purposes the impact on German morale of large numbers of high quality and enthusiastic American troops would be significant. In any case:

> …arguments against deferring the crisis to 1920 are so strong as to be irresistible. The war weariness in Great Britain, the exhaustion of France and Italy, and the impatience of America, who will by that time have been at war for over 2 years will oblige us to strike in 1919 or to stop the war...all enthusiasm for the war is dead.'[94]

Equally, the Germans must not be allowed to consolidate in Russia and Asia and he therefore had 'no hesitation' in saying that the culminating period for supreme military effort on Western Front should be no later than 1 July 1919. To prepare for this major offensive, Wilson recommended bringing as many British units as possible back from 'out-theatres' and their replacement with Indian divisions; hardly the actions of a committed 'easterner'. The 1919 offensive would need 43 British divisions, a significant reduction from the 59 available in mid- 1918. This echoed Lloyd George's determination that British divisions would be significantly reduced by the autumn; the present levels, he believed, were untenable.[95] Artillery and machine-gun units would be expanded and the cavalry reduced.

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[94] CAB 25/85, pp. 7-9.
[95] CAB 23/17/25, X Committee, 26 July 1918.

Wilson's scheme, which he shared with Haig and Foch, involved an 'Allied Tank attack' on a 50-mile front by 70 infantry and eight cavalry divisions, supported by 10,500 tanks. The British would contribute 20 divisions and 3,000 tanks, plus 7,300 mechanical tractors with supplies.[96] Wilson's plan failed to impress Haig, who wrote on his copy 'Words! Words! Words! Lots of Words! And little else.'[97] In fairness to both, Haig had just attended a meeting with Pershing, Pétain and Foch to plan for taking the offensive in a few weeks and was unlikely to have been able to give much thought to plans for a year hence.[98] Likewise Wilson, along with most of his colleagues, had little idea of Foch's plans for taking the offensive, nor expectations for their subsequent success.

Wilson was left in no doubt of his political masters' disdain. The day after Lloyd George had dismissed it as 'Wully reborn', it was torn apart by the Imperial War Cabinet (IWC).[99] Milner, normally Wilson's ally, but a longstanding supporter of 'eastern' initiatives, expressed surprise that the Western Front had returned to the strategic debate 'in great strength'. He had the gravest doubt of an Allied victory there in 1919 because 'the Western Front was a candle that burned all the moths that entered it.' As far as he was concerned 'it was now out of the question that we could play the great rôle on the Western Front.' Wilson was encouraged by the Australian Prime Minister W.M. 'Billy' Hughes who thought 'we must

[96] CAB 25/85 pp. 26-7.
[97] Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig: Diaries*, p. 434.
[98] Greenhalgh, *Foch*, p. 407-9.
[99] TNA, CAB, 23/44A/7, Imperial War Cabinet (IWC), 31 July 1918.

smash the Boches in France'. Smuts also doubted an Allied victory in 1919, 'time, space & season have nothing to do with these strategists!', wrote Wilson, disdainfully.[100] According to Hankey, the view of the meeting was that 'we were running the risk of shattering the American Army next year, as we shattered our own Army in 1916 and 1917, without achieving a decision.'[101] Lloyd George condemned the soldiers for always expecting the government to supply whatever number of troops they asked for. He questioned the cost of the proposed 1919 offensive and 'could not find a syllable as to income or wastage'. Wilson said he could not address the issue of 'income' [numbers of new troops] because he was unclear whether the government intended to conscript Ireland; as for losses, he estimated 25,000 per month.[102] He noted:

> I was able to knock him [Lloyd George] about rather severely by showing that the paper itself & the graphic gave the whole of the information. Practically all the PMs ie LG, Borden, [Sir Robert Borden, Prime Minister of Canada] Hughes (but not so much), Smuts, Massey [William F. Massey, Prime Minister of New Zealand] & Milner are of opinion that we can't beat the Boches on the Western front, & so they go wandering about looking for other laurels.[103]

Two days later, Milner told Wilson that Lloyd George found him 'too much "Western Front" in his ideas and too much like Robertson.'[104] Wilson's recollection was that 'LG was beginning to suspect me of being a "Wully" which of course is nonsense.'[105]

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[100] Wilson diary, 31 July 1918.
[101] Hankey diary, 31 July 1918, in Hankey, *Supreme Command* (vol. II), p. 830.
[102] TNA, CAB, 23/44A/8, IWC, 1 August 1918.
[103] Wilson diary, 1 August 1918.
[104] Hankey diary, 2 August 1918, in Hankey, *Supreme Command* (vol. II), p. 831.
[105] Wilson diary, 2 August 1918.

Future Strategy and the 'out-theatres'

Where Wilson's paper differed from his earlier recommendations was the secondary role he assigned to some long-standing priorities. In the first quarter of 1918 the War Cabinet had been concerned about the future of the Italian front. In July, the CIGS concluded that a German offensive in Italy was possible later in the year. He recommended improving transport communications, and establishing a reserve by sending three or four British divisions to augment the three already there. There were no proposals for Allied offensive action. At the IWC, Lloyd George and Smuts questioned Wilson on options for an Italian offensive, but he stood his ground. The weather would have deteriorated by the time the additional divisions arrived, and in 1919 effort had to be concentrated on the Western Front.[106] As for the Balkans, Wilson had no fears of an attack, but again opposed a large scale offensive because it would be 'handicapped by the interminable political jealousies between Italian, French, Greek and Serbian interests.'[107] In Palestine he again favoured 'active defence', pointing out that German advances in Persia and Southern Russia meant she was forging a route to the valuable resources of the east without needing Egypt, the Suez Canal and Syria.

The regions in which the Allies needed to concentrate what resources they could spare from the west, according to Wilson, were those which had recently been under the influence of Imperial Russia. Acknowledging that

[106] TNA, CAB, 23/44A/8, IWC, 1 August 1918.
[107] CAB 25/85 pp. 15-17.

he was 'trenching [sic] on the domain of policy, which is beyond the bounds of my responsibility,' he did so because the 'ultimate security of the British Empire depends on the extent to which British policy and British strategy are made to harmonise in defence of British interests.' What was needed was a political and military strategy to create 'neutral zones' and 'Buffer States' that would help safeguard Britain's vital interests 'for years to come.'[108] In Southern Russia, especially in Transcaucasia, between the Black and Caspian Seas, the Germans were making significant inroads.[109] Wilson had similar fears for Persia and parts of Mesopotamia, all of strategic importance due to their oil and other natural resources, and their proximity to Afghanistan and India, the jewel in Britain's imperial crown. The Germans controlled the Black Sea and were now heading towards the oil centre of Baku on the Caspian. If they achieved this they would control the railways 'up to the very borders of Afghanistan.' Wilson argued that this made it essential for Britain to consolidate in Mesopotamia, Persia and take control of the Caspian: 'Indeed it is not too much to say that both with a view to winning this war and to securing the safety of India for the next generation we should devote our efforts to this theatre rather than to Palestine.'[110]

He recommended bolstering local forces using limited numbers of British and Allied troops to hamper German expansionism. A linked priority was to force Germany to keep divisions in the east by encouraging anti-

[108] CAB 25/85, p. 31.
[109] Rob Johnson, *The Great War & the Middle East: A Strategic Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 235-40.
[110] CAB 25/85, p.18.

Bolshevik forces to re-establish an Eastern Front, and distracting German resources.[111] This element of the report encapsulated the challenge the War Cabinet had wrestled with in recent months, the development of a cohesive Allied policy for Russia. The proposal found favour with Milner, the arch-imperialist. As he told the IWC, he would prefer it if the French and the Americans provided the bulk of the forces in the west in 1919, allowing Britain to move up to 15 divisions elsewhere: 'If practically the whole of the Germany Army was contained on the Western Front, this reserve should be able to achieve a great deal.' Hughes, one of the few IWC members who still believed in victory in the west, pointed out that those with the largest forces in that theatre would dominate the peace: 'From this point of view it was very undesirable to leave France and the United States to finish the war on the Western Front.'[112] While agreeing this was a legitimate concern, Wilson was not advocating such a risk. As usual he wanted to hedge his bets and ensure British effectiveness in both theatres. The CIGS had already ordered Lieutenant-General Sir William R. Marshall, the commander of the British Mesopotamian Army, to establish a line of communication between Baghdad and Baku and had sanctioned a small force to take the latter city.[113] This action was successful and the port was taken, and held, on 4 August 1918.[114]

[111] William Philpott, *Attrition: Fighting the First World War* (London: Little Brown, 2014), p. 308.
[112] TNA, CAB, 23/44A/7, IWC, 31 July 1918.
[113] CAB 25/85 p. 21.
[114] F.J. Moberly, *OH: The Campaign in Mesopotamia: 1914-1918* (vol. IV), (London: HMSO, 1927), pp. 204-10.

The other key opportunity Wilson saw for reviving the Eastern Front, was encouraging anti-Bolshevik forces in Siberia and in Northern Russia. These ideas were not new to the 1918-1919 strategy document. Wilson and the War Cabinet had been discussing interventionist policies since before the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk formally ended the war between the Central Powers and Bolshevik Russia on 3 March 1918. The fear in London was that the new Russian government, which was not in control of the whole of the former Tsarist Empire, might ally itself with the Germans. At best, it was feared, Germany would dominate Russia and its economy, making it a vassal state.[115] Wilson believed the answer was encouraging, funding and arming anti-Bolshevik forces, and sending them limited military support. On Siberia the War Cabinet, and Milner and Wilson in particular, favoured encouraging Japan to enter the war. The SWC had already agreed JN16 which recommended Japanese intervention in Siberia to seize the strategically important railway between Vladivostok and the Chinese city of Harbin. The idea was that a Japanese force would assist anti-Bolshevik elements and protect the region from German incursions.[116] The result, it was hoped, would at minimum force the Germans to keep significant troop numbers in the east; at best, it would protect the British Empire from the threat of a resurgent Germany.

Wilson stuck to this thesis into the summer of 1918. He stated that: 'The resurrection of Russia can only be brought about by Allied intervention in

[115] John Fisher, *Curzon and British Imperialism in the Middle East: 1916-1919* (London: Frank Cass, 1999), pp. 268-9.
[116] TNA, CAB 25/120 (Nos 1-150), Supreme War Council, Papers and Minutes, 'Joint Note 16, Japanese intervention in Siberia,'19 February 1918.

Siberia and the re-creation of an Eastern Front.' To Wilson's frustration, his 'cousin', as he referred to the US President in his diaries, disagreed. Worried about American public opinion, and concerned that it might be difficult for the Allies to contain a Japanese army once in Siberia, President Wilson was reluctant to give his approval. The Japanese refused to get involved unless invited specifically by the US.[117] In May, Wilson told the Japanese Military Attaché in London that 'from a military point of view the Japanese Army could not intervene too soon nor go too far & that I was always impressing this on my Govt. & hoped the Jap[anese] GS would do the same to their Govt.' The same day, according to Wilson, the War Cabinet discussed Russia, including whether the British should occupy Archangel, Murmansk and Vladivostok and whether they should 'blow up the [Russian] Baltic fleet'. How this was to be achieved is unclear. There is no record of the discussion in the War Cabinet minutes for that date, although Hankey typically avoided recording strategically sensitive material.[118] The SWC meeting in early June approved an Allied force to protect Murmansk and Archangel from German occupation with the British Major-General F.C. Poole in command. Wilson was actively involved in these X Committee policy debates with the Prime Minister, and Milner. Lloyd George displayed a strategic insight greater than his more 'gung-ho' colleagues and, like President Wilson, cautioned against 'the danger of setting Russia against us. This was one of the cases where a

[117] TNA, CAB 28/4, War Cabinet, IC 66, *Procès-verbal* of the Third Meeting of the Sixth Session of the Supreme War Council, 3 June 1918; for a detailed discussion of this aspect of the war see Paul E. Dunscomb, *Japan's Siberian Intervention, 1918-1922: 'A Great Disobedience Against the People"* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).
[118] Wilson diary, 11 May 1918; TNA, CAB 23/6/31, War Cabinet, 11 May 1918.

mistake might prove fatal. If Germany once got the gigantic man-power of Russia into her hands the Allies would be bankrupt.'[119] While there was an overarching logic in Wilson's commitment to protect Britain's imperial interest, the lack of a co-ordinated Allied strategy in the outlying theatres made progress difficult. Manpower was short, and working with disaffected local groups with their own agenda was problematic. Wilson was casting about for ideas because, as is clear from both his recommendations for future strategy and his diaries, in the summer of 1918 he was not convinced that the war would end in Germany's total defeat. He was worried that even if the Allies won on the Western Front it was:

> …difficult to see how we could force such terms on the Central Powers as would loosen their hold in the East or close the road to Egypt and India. Unless by the end of the war democratic Russia can be reconstituted as an independent military power it is only a question of time before most of Asia becomes a German colony, and nothing can impede the enemy's progress towards India…[120]

It was in Britain's vital interest, he argued, to reconstitute Russia as an armed and independent state, strong enough to withstand future German aggression: 'If the war closes without this being accomplished the future of the British Empire will be seriously menaced…'[121] While Poole's adventure in North Russia fizzled out, a Japanese force did intervene in Siberia in August 1918, but this ended as 'a failure and a sideshow'.[122] By then Wilson had bigger priorities; the collapse of the German forces on the Western Front and the imminent end of the war. In the peace negotiations

[119] TNA, CAB 23/17/15, X Committee, 19 June 1918.
[120] CAB 25/85, p. 29.
[121] Ibid., p. 31.
[122] Dunscomb, *Japan's Siberian Intervention*, p. 56.

that followed, many of the fears he had stressed in his policy document would come to the fore.[123]

CONCLUSION

Contrary to the abiding characterisation in the historiography, Wilson was neither an unquestioning Francophile nor a Lloyd George stooge. Once CIGS, and with Foch as overall Allied commander, Wilson had no hesitation in challenging his friend in defence of British interests. As far as Lloyd George was concerned, he soon learned that while Wilson had a strategic view which went far beyond the Western Front, he was ultimately a pragmatist. Once it became clear that American forces were arriving on the Continent in significant numbers, he began planning for a decisive offensive to end the war in 1919. This would be directed against Germany, on the Western Front, and not, as the Prime Minister continued to hope, in the east. Wilson had always been a 'Westerner', but one who as CIGS was able to combine the immediate priority of defeating Germany, with a broader vision of how the peace might look, especially for British imperial interests. While it was to be expected that Lloyd George would have been disappointed by Wilson's proposals for a major Western Front offensive in 1919, he should not have been surprised. Wilson had signaled in JN12 that the balance of power would shift back in the Allies' favour in 1919, and by implication an offensive posture in the west would then be possible. Condemning Wilson as a Robertson clone was also misplaced.

[123] See Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers: Six Months that Changed the World* (London: John Murray, 2002 [2001])

The second half of JN12 went into much greater detail about strategy options for other theatres away from France and Flanders than those of his predecessor's. Importantly, Wilson, in contrast to Smuts, Milner and several members of the IWC, was confident the war could be won in 1919.

CONCLUSION

The thesis has taken a broader view of Sir Henry Wilson than the rather one-dimensional picture that exists in the historiography. Keith Jeffery's recent biography took a much more even-handed approach than had existed hitherto, but its focus was directed towards Wilson's political interests and actions, particularly the politics of Ireland. Wilson's strategic contribution during the Great War was, as this work has shown, more significant than has been acknowledged previously. During the final 18 months of the war Wilson was invested with both influence, and power. Study of primary sources, particularly his diaries and correspondence, has shown that he played a more significant role in Allied strategy than the historiography has acknowledged. Even allowing for the personal hyperbole inevitable in first-person recollection, Wilson was no bystander to the development of strategy of the Lloyd George government, nor was he without influence with the new French premier Georges Clemenceau. He helped frame a new focus for Allied strategy in late 1917, one which effectively put paid to the notion of a major offensive either on the Western Front, or in one of the peripheral theatres. Dominating the deliberations of the SWC, he helped improve the co-ordination of Allied strategic planning in a number of contentious areas, a contribution which ultimately led to unity of command under Foch.

Wilson is one of the Great War's most controversial British generals. He is a constant figure in the strand of historiography that concerns itself with the strategy and the general direction of the war; a tense, fluid and

ruthlessly disputed no-man's land where senior commanders and politicians met. For almost a century, Wilson's reputation has rested far more on what he said, and more especially on what he wrote, than for what he did. In his lifetime, he stood apart from peers such as Haig and Robertson because of his fondness for gossip, his willingness to share his outspoken opinions, and his overt fondness for the company of certain politicians, combined with his ill-concealed contempt for others. Lord Esher summed up why soldiers such as Haig, Gough and Allenby never understood Wilson thus: 'He is a bird of such totally different plumage, though of the same breed.'[1] Such a character, unusual, but not exceptional, amongst his contemporaries, might have been passed off as a little more than a personality quirk had it not been for events following his assassination. Wilson died before his formal Parliamentary political career had really begun. His reputation had to rely on Callwell's biography, which painted a portrait that is essentially the image that has survived to date. For those who had long disliked Wilson, the diaries were proof of his bad faith and untrustworthiness. Hugely entertaining, the diaries have defined him ever since. Despite Jeffery's more balanced account, the image remains.

In fact, Wilson's diaries were a late-night safety valve, no more intended for publication in the unexpurgated form in which Callwell presented them than were those of many of his contemporaries, including Haig.[2] Wilson

[1] Esher to Clive, 13 March 1918, in Oliver, Viscount Esher, (ed.), *Journals and Letters of Reginald Viscount Esher (vol. IV), 1916-1930* (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1938), p. 186.
[2] Sheffield and Bourne, *Haig: Diarie*s, pp. 3-4.

recorded the events of the day, often with irritated comments on issues and individuals, spiced with plenty of pungent personal criticism. Callwell repeated many, but not all, of these colourful critiques. He provided contextual narrative but no comment on Wilson's more intemperate remarks. Thus, Wilson's snide references found those who might have considered themselves his friends, or at least valued colleagues, denigrated in public print; hardly surprising then that Wilson's reputation never recovered. As has been demonstrated, Wilson's professional conduct rarely reflected the postprandial sounding off in his journal. Even the BEF's head of intelligence, Charteris, a robust Wilson critic, acknowledged that in his liaison role with Nivelle 'he was scrupulously loyal and correct in all is dealings with Haig and with the War Office.'[3] One of Wilson's greatest personality traits was his bonhomie and good humour, often deployed to great effect in the most trying circumstances.[4] Nonetheless, the abiding image of Wilson remains over-simplified and, consequently, misleading. His undeniably colourful character, and the unguarded remarks in his diary and personal correspondence, have served to obscure, if not conceal altogether, a more complex individual.

Wilson's great contribution to the British war effort was his skill, not as a 'political soldier' dabbling in domestic political 'intrigue', but as a 'soldier-

[3] John Charteris, *Field-Marshal Earl Haig* (London: Cassell, 1929), p. 257.
[4] During the British retreat in late August 1914 an officer contrasted the British Expeditionary Force's (BEF's) Chief of Staff (CoS) Sir Archibald Murray's lacklustre performance with that of the Sub-Chief of Staff, Wilson: 'The Chief of the Staff is dead beat – found him fainting at 5am and poured whisky down his throat ... Sir H. Wilson is…splendid, keeping cheery all the time', IWM, C.R. Woodroffe Papers, diary entry, 26 August 1914.

diplomat'. His close links with, and understanding of, French politicians and senior commanders and their concerns served his country well in the early years of the war, when the British Army played a subsidiary role, and later helped the alliance survive when it was under its greatest pressure. His ability to talk the language of British politicians only came into its own once Lloyd George had tried, and failed, to persuade Britain's senior soldiers to listen to his views. Wilson understood politicians better than any other British military figure of his generation; this was his great strength, and – in the opinion of many of his military colleagues – his greatest weakness. He took as dim a view of most 'frocks' and their motives as any other 'brasshat'.[5] Where Wilson differed was in his ability, in the modern idiom, to 'see the bigger picture'. Rather than paying lip-service to the principle of democratic accountability embodied in the country's political leadership, but doing his best to frustrate it, as both Haig and Robertson did regularly, Wilson opted to work within the system. His strategic vision was characterised by the need to keep Britain's principal ally 'on side' while viewing the war in the broader context of his country's imperial future. In the last 18 months of the war Wilson, who had always had a voice, at last found willing listeners in Lloyd George and other members of the British Cabinet, especially the imperial-minded Milner. In France, Foch was restored to a senior military role and Clemenceau was a new Prime Minister with whom Wilson, the soldier-diplomat, found common cause. In 1918 Wilson's role of maintaining Allied unity of

[5] A mixed metaphor alluding to the formal long-tailed frock coat worn by politicians in Parliament and the gold braid on a general's cap.

purpose, one he had worked towards with limited success for years, finally came into its own. It was a time of great peril for the Allied effort, when French commitment was at its lowest ebb, British manpower resources under pressure, and US support problematic.

His opportunity came in November 1917 when he articulated, for the first time formally, his belief that victory would only be achieved by the imposition of overarching strategic control; a genuinely inter-Allied approach, rather than the flawed free-for-all he felt had existed until then. Failure to establish such a ‘supreme’ authority would lead to defeat, he warned. Wilson ruled out renewed large-scale offensive action away from the Western Front, on the grounds of military practicality rather than ideological aversion. Also, any opportunity for significant gains in other theatres had been missed. After receiving Wilson’s advice, the long-standing strategic debate about ‘knocking the props’ from beneath the Germans finally disappeared from the top of the Prime Minister’s agenda. In future, military policy would be driven by strategic pragmatism rather than emotional conviction. Actions in the secondary theatres would continue, but not at the expense of men and material for the Western Front. One fundamental reason for concentrating effort on one front, the western, in the autumn of 1917, was a manpower shortage. Wilson was less optimistic than Haig in his assessment of Allied resilience for 1918; and less sanguine in his evaluation of those available to the enemy. His conclusion was that in 1918 the time would not be right for a significant

offensive in France and Flanders. The Allies would have to bide their time until US armies arrived in significant numbers.

The SWC was Wilson's brain-child. Once it was established he ensured his views dominated its work and reports. While acknowledging the political support Wilson enjoyed in London and Paris, it was not a foregone conclusion that his views would prevail. Without Wilson's energy and his lobbying of political allies the body might well have foundered. Lloyd George's usual clarity of purpose had deserted him. Robertson and Haig, although under pressure, still had influential support. Wilson's views chimed with those of Foch and in early 1918 both were, at last, in positions of great influence. When it came, Wilson grabbed his opportunity. He was 'the only really independent military representative' at Versailles, each of the others beholden to higher commanders.[6] He attacked the challenge with gusto, 'going strong and as full of ideas as an egg is full of meat'.[7]

With political support in London, and for the most part on the same strategic wavelength as Foch, Wilson dominated the deliberations of the SWC's military representatives. Their Joint Notes were effectively 'Wilson's Notes'; Wilson's vision for future Allied military policy, Wilson's strategy for winning the war. Having long espoused the virtue of an overarching approach to policy-making, he ensured his fellow PMRs concentrated on those areas where an inter-Allied partnership was

[6] Jeffery, *Wilson*, p. 211.
[7] PA, Lloyd George papers, (LG/F/38/2/27), Milner to Lloyd George, 23 December 1917.

essential if new strategies were to succeed. At the heart of these was agreeing military policy for 1918. Unless this was considered holistically, Wilson maintained, it was fruitless debating other issues, especially those of manpower and whether the BEF should take over more French line. The Joint Notes addressed these issues, plus an inter-Allied approach to transport and communications and the production and deployment of tanks and aircraft. To dismiss Versailles as a powerless 'talking shop' downplays the value of its contribution to policy co-ordination. It provided a focus for structured discussion on Allied military strategy for 1918, and helped strengthen a move towards co-operation which had not existed between the Allies to that point. Wilson acted as the 'dynamo' for the deliberations of the Allied staff at Versailles 'and in large measure succeeded in persuading his colleagues to support Lloyd George's agenda for 1918.'[8] This was due to his aptitude for managing relationships with his fellow PMRs, his diplomatic skills, and his industry. Wilson stood apart from his Allied colleagues in seeing the SWC as a real policy-making body. Weygand, Foch's deputy, was for the most part a cypher for *GQG*, and the Italian, Cadorna, was bruised and disengaged after losing his command after Caporetto. When he became CIGS, Wilson continued to follow the strategic principles he had successfully articulated during the production of the Joint Notes, which were formally considered, and almost all accepted, at the monthly meetings of the SWC. Although he had no way of knowing so at the time, Wilson's time as PMR was a dry-run for his

[8] French, *Strategy*, p. 128.

actions as CIGS and contributed to the framing of British strategic policy in the final year of the war.

Wilson's was an influential voice that helped formulate British manpower policy in 1918. Accepting the need for the British to do more to support the French, he believed the answer was for his government to drive conscription harder. Thanks to his access to the British and the French Prime Ministers, he had a greater impact on these events than has been acknowledged. Some of these impacts, particularly his diplomatic efforts with the French – his greatest contribution to the British war effort – were vital when relations were fragile and tempers frayed. He also nurtured strong links with senior American figures, with mixed results as far as Britain's strategic expectations were concerned. His myopic obsession with the imposition of conscription on Ireland, had a less positive outcome. Despite contrary advice from experts on the ground, his was an important voice in persuading Lloyd George and the War Cabinet to impose conscription there. In what with hindsight was a blessing for all concerned, the decision was never implemented, but it was not without consequences. Jeffery argued that the legislation served to 'galvanise and alienate nationalist Ireland' leading ultimately to the island's partition in 1921.[9]

Wilson's greatest contribution to his country's war effort was his role, in varying guises, as the British Army's principal soldier-diplomat. His long-

[9] Jeffery, *Wilson*, p. 223.

standing association with the French military and political élites had been valuable before the war, and was increasingly important as the conflict progressed. From late 1917 British and French Prime Ministers found Wilson a soldier with whom they could do business. For his part Wilson was fortunate that his old friend Foch held sway in the French Army. The historiography ascribes considerable weight to Wilson's undoubted 'Francophilia', creating an image of a British general so enamoured of the French that he was little more than a Gallic mouthpiece. In fact, in contradiction of the views of some of his contemporaries, Wilson was a staunch defender of Britain's strategy on the Western Front, and elsewhere. During 1918 he was a sustained and influential critic of French policy, both political and military. His strong relationship with the French high command enabled him to defuse inter-Allied tensions; a feat that often eluded other British leaders. Wilson by no means twisted Clemenceau, or Foch, around his finger, but he was often able to persuade them to bend. With diminishing resources, Clemenceau was 'playing the game of inter-alliance poker' with a deteriorating hand.[10] Wilson understood the French dilemma and strove to keep the entente strong. Despite his private criticism of Pershing, Wilson, with the more flexible Bliss, brokered an agreement which increased the flow of US troops to France at a crucial time. He was also quicker than his Prime Minister in the pragmatic acceptance that there was more to be gained from acknowledging the American vision of their role in the war than from continued confrontation.

[10] Cohen, *Supreme Command*, p. 83.

In the last few months of the war, Wilson's support for formalised Allied strategic co-operation enjoyed a receptive and sympathetic audience in London and Paris. A single C-in-C for the forces on the Western Front was the inevitable, if to Wilson less appealing, corollary. Contrary to the accepted orthodoxy Wilson, while a Francophile, was not a naïve stooge. Always suspicious of French hegemony, he was an important lightning rod between Lloyd George and Clemenceau, trusted, as much as they trusted anybody, by both. His friendship with Foch meant he was often able to draw much of the sting from the inevitable tensions created by a coalition war and exacerbated by unity of command. Foch 'was one of the few Allied generals who saw the Allied front as a whole, and whose strategic vision extended beyond the Western Front.' Another was Wilson. Regardless of this commonality of purpose, it is going too far to suggest that as Generalissimo Foch 'found his authority was rarely challenged.'[11] As this study has shown, Wilson challenged it often, but they had more in common than they had points of difference; long personal acquaintance smoothed short-term irritations, to the benefit of the Alliance.

In the summer of 1918 Lloyd George established his 'X Committee' to consider the grand strategic challenges, particularly those concerning Britain's post-War imperial future. The value the Prime Minister and Milner set upon Wilson's advice was evident in the fact that he was its other permanent member. Together they decided strategy before the more

[11] Philpott, 'Foch', p.42-3.

problematic debates of the War Cabinet. Until Wilson became CIGS, Woodward noted, at no time 'had the imperial-minded statesmen had a military adviser who took a broader view of the war.' While this does a disservice to Robertson's vision, his focus was, inevitably, on the Western Front. It is why the arch-imperialist Milner and Wilson found such common cause.[12] It is also why, despite his subsequent claims to the contrary, Lloyd George retained Wilson as his principal military adviser until the latter decided to try his hand at parliamentary politics at the end of 1921.

[12] Woodward, *Lloyd George*, p. 282.

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